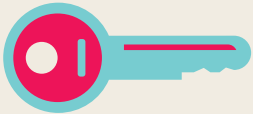


Barbara Bancroft



R U N N I N G



O N



E M P T Y



The Gospel *for Women in Ministry*



“We can teach the gospel without it reaching us because we feel the need to prove our sufficiency in order to justify our leadership in the church. Barbara Bancroft urges us to live beyond the clichés we impose on ourselves in order to live in the freedom of the gospel that will set free the women and men we lead.”

Bryan and Kathy Chapell, Authors of *Each for the Other: Marriage as It's Meant to Be*; ministering at Grace Presbyterian Church in Peoria, IL

“Thank you, Barbara, for taking the time to write to us. You identify the struggles of women in ministry and point us to the Truth. Even for women who have studied Scripture, you make this book fresh and hopeful. To be comfortable in our own skin because of Jesus—yes, it is possible.”

Ed and Sheri Welch, Author; faculty member at the Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation (Ed); administrator at Bridge Community Church, Glenside, PA (Sheri)

“Barbara Bancroft has been a longtime friend and fellow worker in God’s vineyard. Both of us have learned much about our weakness and God’s astonishing gospel to help us navigate through the pitfalls of life and ministry. She is passionate about her need and the need of the women to whom she is writing to stand firm in the truth when we are tempted to get sidelined by our sin, or the sins of others. She is also very honest about her own weaknesses and failures, but knows there is no help outside of going to Christ daily for forgiveness, and to trust again in the power of the Spirit to continue to reach out to a needy and broken world.”

Rose Marie Miller, Missionary to London; author of *From Fear to Freedom and Nothing Is Impossible with God*

“Let’s go ahead and cut to the chase—*Running on Empty* is simply the **best** book Darlene and I have ever read on the ‘raptures and ruptures’ of vocational ministry, and the radical implications of God’s grace for wives and women who are seeking to serve Jesus. As an adjunct faculty member of five seminaries, I will now require this book, not only for the women in my classes, but for every man who is presently or plans to get married; for men need to understand, not just the privileges of ministry, but also the setups and heartaches women face—things they ‘didn’t sign on for.’ Darlene and I got married in 1972 and never thought we would wear the couple title, ‘pastor and pastor’s wife,’ and nothing could have prepared us for the delights and demands, and dissolution and despair ahead. Barbara’s book would have been a gift of invaluable benefit to us, not only as we began our ministry, but through every stage of our shared life. Filled with gospel wisdom and personal anecdotes, beautiful honesty and the hope of grace, Barbara throws the spotlight on Jesus’s love and the freedom he intends for all of us who are passionate to serve him.”

Scotty and Darlene Smith, Ministering at West End Community Church, Nashville, TN; formerly ministering at Christ Community Church, Franklin, TN

“Women in ministry face unique challenges and this book is uniquely helpful. It offers real hope to women who are worn down by the demands of ministry—hope based on the good news that Jesus has paid it all and done it all. After I

read this book, this old pastor's wife felt encouraged and strengthened by the good news of who Christ is and what he has done for me and those I serve. If it could help me, it will help anyone!"

Barbara Miller Juliani, Pastor's wife; author; editor

"I'm not a fan of Christian books, so I was surprised to discover laughter and tears as I read *Running on Empty*. With a rare economy of words, Barbara pinpoints the rumblings of our soul, names the unidentified issues, and compassionately takes us to the one place we can be filled. If you're a woman in ministry, work with one, or know one, this book is for you."

Shari Thomas, Founder/Director of Parakaleo

"Please don't buy this book . . . unless you want real help for real women in real ministry. Barbara Bancroft has that rare blend of rich ministry experience without the accompanying cynicism or Pollyanna-like attitude that affects so many of us. Instead, she offers us a voice that whispers behind us, 'This is the way. Walk in it.' Barbara Bancroft doesn't tackle all of the exegetical conundrums of Scripture in relation to women. She doesn't intend to. Rather, she elucidates and, with humor and humility, illustrates sound principles of gospel application which have been proven in a variety of cultural contexts. I'm thankful for this book. It will help not just women in ministry, but ministry marriages like mine."

John F. Thomas, Director of Global Training, Redeemer City to City

"In *Running on Empty*, Barbara Bancroft utilizes personal insight and transparent humility to highlight topics of interest for women in ministry. Whether co-laboring with a husband or single, women in ministry often do not know what they do not know. Barbara sheds light on this for all of us. With captivating stories and heart-probing questions, she helps women navigate issues like entitlement, comparison, worry, and self-pity. Her words are comforting and encouraging. While reading, I felt as if I could have been sitting in Barbara's living room, sipping tea, listening to her tell her story, and soaking up her wisdom."

Daniel and Mandy Montgomery, Ministering at Sojourn Community Church, Louisville, KY

"Barbara's remarkable book will help you answer many hard questions: If I do marry a pastor, what will my life be like? If I am already a pastor's wife, what do I need to remember about Jesus to survive? But much more basic and blessed for all of us, is that deepest issue of all: how do I put together the blessedness of Jesus in my life with all the hard things that threaten my faith? This book is honest and genuine, and points directly to Jesus in many unexpected deep ways."

D. Clair Davis, Professor of Church History Emeritus, Westminster Theological Seminary

"Barbara is the real deal. She doesn't just give advice on ministry; she invites you into the journey with her toward the overflowing pool of reliance and nourishment that is God's Word. Barbara's book is full of gutsy grace and loving transparency . . . we wish we'd had the courage to write it."

Rev. Dr. Stephen and Berenice Rarig, Church Planting Team Leader, Mission To The World; cofounder Trinity Theological College, Perth Western Australia (Stephen); Founder, Coordinator MAKE Collective (Berenice)

Running on Empty

The Gospel for Women in Ministry

Barbara Bancroft



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DEDICATION

For my sweetheart, Josiah, who keeps life interesting.

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Chapter 1

Are You Ready For Some Ministry?

Ready: prepared for immediate action or use; inclined;
apt to happen; liable at any moment. (Wiktionary)

IN THE LATE 1970s, my husband, Josiah, and I spent his seminary internship in a sunny Florida city. A regular part of Josiah's responsibilities was to take care of all who came to the church seeking help. One afternoon he arrived at our apartment with a homeless man, a paranoid schizophrenic who needed a shower, clean clothes, and dinner. The shower, clean clothes, and dinner I could understand, but what I found hard to fathom was that Josiah brought this fellow home—to his pregnant wife and two preschool children—to provide them. The dinner conversation that evening was as odd as you might imagine. And later, it took lots of scrubbing before I could put our children back in the bathtub our guest had used for his shower. I knew Christ wanted me to love troubled souls like this man, but I was not happy that Josiah had brought this particular troubled soul home for me to love. I resented Josiah for what he had done and my faith faltered. My resentment was quickly followed by shame at my response to such a small request

for kindness. The weakness of my faith was revealed as I lost my connection with God's desire to use me in our corner of the world.

Since then, Josiah and I have learned a lot through our years in ministry. Josiah has learned that I respond better if I have some lead time before a difficult situation. I have learned that I have to be ready for ministry *before* the moment arrives.

What *is* ministry? Ministry is our daily answer to Christ's call to love the world and communicate his good news. The unexpectedness of what we are sometimes asked to do exposes our inadequacies, as the visit from the homeless man exposed mine. Those moments often catch us at our most vulnerable (in my case, pregnant and exhausted by preschoolers) to highlight how truly needy we are. I thought of myself as hospitable and loving until this troubled man exposed the tenuous nature of my hospitality and love.

When ministry pushes us to do things we do not want to do, we may feel alone and inadequate or resentful and rebellious. When things get hard, the first question that often comes to mind is, "Where are you, Lord?" We assume that Jesus has left us on our own to feel the poverty of our resources. If you have ever found yourself inadequate for the task at hand or unable to love the people who come your way, you know what I mean. Ministry confronts us with our insufficiency over and over. I have learned that I am better able to respond with faith if I am ready for these moments *before* they occur. So, how do we ready ourselves for ministry?

I have written this book for women whose vocation is Christian ministry, whether we work alongside a husband or pursue our own ministry. Although, every child of God is involved in ministry as part of their identity and calling, I have a heart for women facing the special challenges of vocational ministry. Many of us are running on empty as people and obligations press in. I am persuaded that, more than anything else the good news of Christ's coming is the good news that *we* need to hear *for ourselves*. The gospel message is not just information we share with others; our personal

encounter with the promises of the gospel is what readies *us* for ministry and fills *our tanks*. Knowing that our sins are forgiven, that we stand in Christ's righteousness this and every day, and that he will use us for his kingdom work is our ministry preparation. In this book, I will tell you how the gospel is changing me, and offer hope that it will also change you.

The changes God works in us to ready us for ministry may not be what others expect, but Jesus never calls us to fulfill the stereotypes and expectations others have of us. We can stop using them to evaluate ourselves, grade our progress, and assess our worth to the cause. His plans for us are deeper and broader than our truncated stereotypes. He calls each of us into a relationship with him. Our ability to satisfy expectations and stereotypes is a weak substitute for a relationship with Christ with some reality and life to it. Whether we minister alongside husbands or as single women, effective ministry will flow from us as Jesus grounds us in his love and the righteous life he purchased for us. I hope this book will give you a fresh look at how our relationship with Christ can change the way we experience and engage in ministry.

When Josiah and I began ministry life, I understood little of what I will share with you. I thought I understood the gospel and that what I lacked was formal training, abilities, and experience. Because I finished only one year at university and never had formal ministry training beyond a few seminary courses, I always felt the need to prove my worth. While I worked hard to fulfill the expectations of others, the inward pressure I placed on myself for a perfect ministry performance resulted in a chronic sense of failure and shame. The burden of seeking the good opinion of God and those around me was heavy, and I often stumbled under its weight. No matter what I did, it was never enough. My insecurities and self-dependence got in the way of the gospel's power to work in me.

I know the consequences of the weaknesses and sins that I brought into ministry, but I have also learned something from

women who by temperament and training were more prepared for ministry than I was. Although God regularly uses people who are educated, trained, and experienced to move his kingdom forward, those whose confidence is in their abilities and experience can easily forget their need for Christ in the everyday of ministry. If we rarely question our abilities, it is tempting to rely on them to accomplish our goals instead of relying on the Spirit to work through us. We may live as if God's kingdom moves forward through our plans and efforts. Perhaps we accomplish more, but this can blind us to our pride and leave others with our competence as their model for spirituality. In short, whether we see ourselves as successes or failures in ministry, we will not be ready to do the work God has prepared for us to do until we know how to rely on nothing but the finished work of Christ.

Like many I have met in ministry, I have always had a noisy conscience. For years I felt guilt for what I deemed my feeble ministry efforts. This robbed me of the joy of being part of Christ's kingdom work. Thankfully, the burden of seeking others' approval has lightened as I have experienced God's approval, purchased for me on the cross, and his willingness to use me. I can't say that I never worry about what others think of me, but I can say that my need for their approval has diminished significantly over the years. You and I are no longer burdened to seek the approval of others. The gospel readies us for ministry by giving us confidence in God's approval each day.

As the gospel works its way into our lives, our focus shifts from the quality of our performance to the person of Christ. Turning to Christ in faith reorients us to the truth about what his work for us has accomplished. This in turn frees us from the burden of others' expectations and the weight of unhelpful pride in our achievements. Christ brings his good news to *our* hearts. We belong to him. He is the one who called us into ministry. He understands the struggles we face and the weariness we feel. He knows when we are

misunderstood and underestimated. He knows what we fear. He knows our propensity for pride. He knows that ministry life can be confusing and chaotic. He knows we need some space to be ourselves. He knows our hearts become easily hardened as we fight to survive the pressures of ministry. He sees us hold back when we are certain we have nothing left to give. He would have given me the grace I needed to host our schizophrenic guest with a glad heart if I had simply asked him. He is the powerful Christ! He can change a heart. Simply turning to Christ for the help and comfort we need in our insufficiency strengthens our faith because he *will* help and comfort us. As we learn to live more and more in his presence, our experience of his love and care deepens and we begin to see real change. A heart abiding in Christ is prepared for ministry when it comes.

Some of us think we are in ministry because of our husband's vocation or a friend's urging, some unusual circumstance or because we raised our hand in an emotional moment during an altar call. But Christ's call to ministry is always intentional. There are no accidental ministers. Whether we are single or married, working in a church, on a campus, or with a mission organization, Christ has chosen us to make his gospel known to the world. He made us for the ministry into which he called us.

I have been in ministry with Josiah for thirty-six years. When I said, "I do," to Josiah, I also said, "I do" to ministry. Josiah and ministry were a package deal! Of course, I had no idea at the time what I was signing up for, either in marriage or ministry. Neither marriage books nor ministry books prepared me for the real thing. I remember being surprised, for example, that Josiah could not fix things around the house like my dad could. I remember the first time I was reprimanded by a deacon for a shopping bag he saw in my house from a nice department store. We usually do not recognize our expectations until they are exposed. I thought that all husbands liked to fix things around the house, and I thought that

surely deacons of all people would be supportive rather than critical of the pastor's family.

My willingness to stay married and to remain in ministry have both been in jeopardy at times. Over the years, I have spoken with many women in ministry and, when I have been able to assure them that I am a safe person to be honest with, they have echoed my experiences. Those of us who are married soon discover that ministry puts considerable pressure on our marriages. (You brought *who* home for dinner!) It complicates parenting. (There are reasons for the volumes written on the struggles of pastors' kids and missionary kids.) If they desire marriage, single women may find that ministry makes it virtually impossible to find a mate, as many men are intimidated by their competence and intimate relationship with Christ. (Not to mention the small pool of dating material in many of the places women serve.) Ministry makes friendships more challenging. (How much can I confide? Whom can I trust?) Ministry pushes us into uncomfortable roles and awkward situations that do not fit us at all. (We all have examples here!) Regardless of our emotional response to Christ's call to ministry, his response to us is sure: "Before they call I will answer; while they are yet speaking I will hear" (Isaiah 65:24). He is quick to answer our prayers.

Although particulars differ, the strain of ministry is hard on both single and married women. During our first missionary term in the Republic of Ireland, we were privileged to have two single women on our team. Through their patient tutelage I began to understand some of the pressures they faced. Everything that is required to maintain life, single women do for themselves. In our family, I manage the bank account and Josiah manages the technology; I make the side dishes and he grills the meat. We divide our work. Yet single women do everything for themselves while working their demanding ministry jobs. To some they appear to have an abundance of free time. They can be viewed as convenient babysitters for missionary teams and church staffs.

Married women focus on the time and effort needed to nurture our marriages and children, but often forget that it takes an incredible amount of time and energy for single women to find and maintain relationships worth nurturing. I was recently with a single missionary whose roommate had returned to the States. She was filled with grief at the loss of this supportive friendship. Given the pressures involved in living where she did, she wondered if she had the emotional energy to invest in another relationship that she knew would be impermanent. Her faith challenge is to continue to invest herself in loving each roommate who enters her life, trusting that Jesus will care for her.

When I entered ministry as a pastor's wife, I did not understand the unique nature of Christ's call to me. I began ministry thinking that I was called to look like the mythically perfect pastors' wives I thought I knew. I did not realize that God's plan was to use my history, personality, gifts, passions, and abilities, mixed with Josiah's, to create a unique ministry that would change and grow as we did. Today it seems obvious to me that we would not be like anyone else and that God did not have a cookie-cutter ministry planned for us, but at the beginning of our ministry, we had both been taught to model ourselves after others. For many years this dynamic created tension in our marriage and ministry. Neither of us fit the molds we kept trying to squeeze ourselves (and each other) into. I wanted to give up on myself, marriage, and ministry many times because I was unable to be the woman I thought I was supposed to be. There were so many voices telling me what I should look like that I missed the reassuring voice of the Spirit, who was even then making me into the person Christ created me to be. It took a long time before I understood that Christ's plan was not to make me more like others but, rather, more like himself.

I have been a believer since I was nine years old. When I was ten, I knew God was calling me to be a missionary. When I was twenty, I married Josiah, who was on his way to seminary and the

pastorate. I have spent eighteen years as a pastor's wife and eighteen years in missions. I have felt Christ's presence and love. You would think that faith would come more naturally to me because I have seen God answer countless prayers and do amazing things. Yet, after so many years of being in relationship with him and seeing him work, I still have doubts and fears. I still fall into cynicism and discouragement. There are times when my belief in his love wavers. There are times when I think he has made a mistake in choosing me for the job. But we will never step into ministry if we are waiting for perfect faith.

Josiah currently oversees the missionaries and stateside renewal ministries of Serge (formerly World Harvest Mission). We have traveled to many countries to work with missionary teams and nationals. We have logged thousands of miles in the U.S. meeting with pastors and their wives, speaking at conferences, recruiting for Serge teams, talking about how the gospel has changed us, and meeting with our financial and prayer supporters. Yet I rarely start a trip without some internal resistance. I am basically a homebody, hesitant around new people and unknown situations. My desire to follow Christ has not turned me into a different person. Still, Jesus gives me courage to say yes to opportunities when I want to say no. He makes me willing to board the plane when I want to stay home. My faith does not always feel in sync with his plan, yet the Spirit gets me where he wants me. He regularly answers my prayers for the grace I need for these trips, right when I need it. Although my faith is never perfect as I step into ministry, I have learned that if I step out with even the smallest amount of faith, he will supply what I lack. Christ's promise to his people is that he will be with us, provide what we need, and work through us. As we wake each morning, our job is to believe him. The power of Christ instills surprising faith in us at times, but even when our faith is weak, Christ will accomplish things through us. The quality and strength of our faith is not what matters, but that our faith rests only in him.

On one of our trips to India, Josiah and I split up for the second half of our visit. He was traveling with a missionary to explore a possible area of ministry in the northwest part of the country (a journey too dangerous for women at the time) while I was to travel from Delhi with the missionary's wife to her home (an eight-hour taxi ride). I would later have to make the eight-hour return trip by myself to meet Josiah before flying home to Ireland.

I was nervous about returning to Delhi alone. India is a big place with a lot of people. The day before we were to begin our separate journeys, I became violently ill. Josiah suggested that I check into a comfortable hotel to recover until he returned. What a tempting offer! After all, I was really sick. I did not have a lot of faith that day, but I had just enough to pray that if I was able to get out of bed and into the taxi the next morning, I would take that as God's answer to my fears of traveling alone. Sure enough, the next day although not well, I was able to get out of bed. I made the long trip with my friend that day settled in the knowledge that when it was time to return, God would give me the faith I needed.

I like to tell this story because it shows how God used my small mustard seed of faith to get me into a taxi. I know many brave missionary women, but I am not one of them. I could pretend that I am excited to find myself in strange places as I travel around the globe, but usually I find myself crying out for grace to navigate these new places. I do not want to miss the moments of ministry God provides because I am absorbed with worry about myself.

As we look to Scripture for insights into ministry life, we can find comfort and encouragement in the gospel's uncensored descriptions of the first disciples. We discover a lot by the way Jesus loved and tutored them through ministry. The New Testament did not catalog a group of holy men for us to emulate, but rather a group of ordinary men who struggled to believe. The disciples had all sorts of responses to Jesus and the situations he placed them in, and so do we. We read in Acts 1:6 that after all they had

been through with Christ they were still confused about his plan of redemption. Jesus's plan to leave them behind was unexpected. How could they continue to follow him if he left them? They could no longer make sense of his call or his teaching.

Are you confused by God's thoughts and ways as he loves the world through you? The disciples were. His word of comfort to them was simple. He vowed never to leave them alone. He promised to send his Spirit to live in them. Jesus's word to us is the same. No matter how confusing things get, we are not alone as we take his good news to the world. He has sent his Spirit to live in us. Just as it was with his disciples, his answer to the confusion that ministry brings into our lives is to remind us that he has left us his Spirit. Whether the Spirit is convicting us of sin, comforting our hearts, or opening doors of ministry, his purpose is always to point us to the person and work of Christ. However the Spirit gets us to that moment, we will find Jesus waiting to receive us. This is the work of his Spirit.

The difficulty of an eight-hour solo journey in India pushed me to Christ. It was not until I got into the taxi for the return journey to Delhi that I realized that my fears had left me. It was the last day of Ramadan, so the streets were filled with Muslim men and children in celebration of the day. Groups of men surrounded our car as we drove through each small town. I had no cell phone and had forgotten to get contact phone numbers. I did not speak Hindi. My driver (who did not speak English) took a long detour off the two-lane paved road onto a dirt road that went for miles and miles past fields of sugarcane. (I only realized later that he was trying to avoid the Ramadan crowds.) Meanwhile, I suspected that my turbaned driver with his large gray mustache might die of a heart attack at any moment. He was ancient.

What an amazing eight hours! I wasn't sure I would make it to Delhi (Did Jesus have other plans for me?), but I was sure that he was in control of my situation. I had no doubt that God had heard

my prayers. Timid as I am, I was never afraid because I knew he was with me. Jesus knows how desperately we will need him as we step into ministry, just as the first disciples did. Ministry often pushes us beyond our comfortable limits, just as Jesus pushed his disciples into situations that were beyond them. We are Christ's disciples for this age and he has not left us to figure things out on our own; he has sent his Spirit to lead us and remind us that he is with us, weaving every moment of our lives into the beautiful tapestry that is his kingdom coming. We can be confident that he is always with us and will always answer our prayers.

It does not take long to realize our need for Jesus as we experience the vulnerability that ministry introduces into our lives. When Josiah was a pastor, there were many times we would be having a conversation in public only to look up and see someone from the church listening to everything we said. It was not that we were talking about things that were interesting ("Would you like Grape Nuts or Frosted Flakes?") or confidential (although that has happened), but it was an unpleasant feeling to have our personal space unexpectedly invaded.

Ministry puts us on display. When we speak to people about the power of the gospel for redemption and deep change, they appropriately look to us to see the evidence of our words. That is why so many of us hide. We often see little evidence of the present power of the gospel in ourselves. We believe that ministry requires that we "put up or shut up," which is why we are so tempted to shade the truth about ourselves. Who would believe our words if they got a good look at our hearts? Every part of our lives is not simply on display, but on display in high definition with "enhanced picture quality." Every sin, weakness, struggle, and quirk is highlighted. Little wonder that we are tempted to hide, dodge, fake it, and correct people's impressions of us.

What we say and do every day is big and out there and (even if we are good at hiding) will eventually come to light. Jesus said it

this way: “No one after lighting a lamp covers it with a jar or puts it under a bed, but puts it on a stand, so that those who enter may see the light. For nothing is hidden that will not be made manifest, nor is anything secret that will not be known and come to light” (Luke 8:16–17). If we want others to see the power of the gospel at work in a life, *we must be willing to be that life* put on display so that those around us will not only see God work, but also *how* he works. Then they will learn to step out in faith for themselves. Our willingness to live our lives displayed in high definition is not a negative side effect of ministry; rather it is the primary way God reveals himself through us. As people see how the gospel works to change us, they are encouraged to believe that it will also work to change them.

All believers are called to daily take up their cross and share Christ’s good news with those around them. Every follower of Christ is called to minister in his kingdom. But those whom Christ has called to give up their lives for a ministry vocation face unique challenges and pressures. Like Jesus, we have a shepherd’s heart and feel deeply for the sheep he has entrusted to our care. We carry their burdens. Because others look to us as examples of faith, Satan will continually come after us. We have potential to do great good as well as great harm for Christ’s kingdom. And despite what Scripture teaches about the priesthood of every believer, those in ministry are consistently held to a higher standard. We have all heard stories of old clothes and used tea bags being sent to African missionaries, the assumption being that missionaries do not care about what they wear or a good cup of tea. Have you been judged by the model car you drive or where you grocery shop? Those of us who have devoted our lives to ministry have a special sisterhood of crazy stories, shared joys, and deep sorrows. (The things people say to us!)

Each chapter of this book starts with a topic of common interest to women in ministry—things that are challenging and difficult to talk about. Next, there are questions to help us sort through our thoughts and experiences and focus our prayers where we see the

Spirit working. Finally, each chapter ends with a Scripture meditation to reorient us to the promises of Christ (*Pause*) and the power of his Spirit at work (*Reset*) even in the hard places of our lives. We are in this fight together. No one is alone.

What Are Your Thoughts?

1. What does Christ's call to ministry look like for you in your present circumstance?
2. Where do you feel the press of ministry? What expectations from those you serve add to the pressure you feel? What pressures do you place on yourself?
3. What difficulties and struggles prevent you from connecting with God's love and care?
4. "If we want others to see the power of the gospel at work in a life, we must be willing to be that life, put on display so that those around us will not only see God work, but also how he works." How can this perspective change your approach to ministry?

Pause and Reset

Anticipation

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. [Sisters], I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are mature think this way. (Philippians 3:7–15a)

We learn a lot about the nature of ministry when we read the writings of Paul. As he writes to the Philippians from a jail cell, Paul has followed Christ for many years. His description of where ministry has taken him is revealing. He describes himself as having lost everything to gain Christ. Ministry always brings suffering into our lives. It always has a cost. When we think of Paul's humanity, we get a sense of just how much of his life has been stripped away as he sits in that jail cell. He has suffered the loss of all things and we feel his loss.

Not only did he never marry, thus finding himself alone in that way, now he is stuck in jail and cannot visit the spiritual children into whom he has poured his life. Paul seems to have little in the way of possessions. He relinquished his standing and future as a brilliant Pharisee. He suffered many physical difficulties and dangers in his travels. From what we read in the New Testament, after Paul's conversion, he picked up his cross and never looked back. Giving all that we have is Christ's call to all believers, but that call has many tangible results for those of us in vocational ministry. We serve and lay down our lives so that others may come to know Christ. As it did Paul, ministry ushers us into a lifestyle of suffering and loss.

Suffering in ministry for the benefit of others has a particular effect on us. It begins to pare down our excess. If you have bought a new car lately or seen recent car advertisements, you know about

excess. These days the car we drive off the lot can have all of the comforts of home, act as our concierge, navigate our route, and offer a complicated menu of phone and music options activated by our voices—cool extras. In ministry we often fall into the temptation of leaning into our extras: all of the gifts, abilities, and experiences that God has given us.

Perhaps you are a wonderful teacher or an awesome cook. As we read in Philippians 3:4–6, when Paul refers to the confidence he could have had in his heritage, his accomplishments, and his abilities, we realize that Paul was also tempted in this way. But the uniqueness of the suffering that results as we bring the gospel to others is seen in its refining work. It strips away our dependence on the extras we tend to rely on. It pushes us to Christ. This is the effect of suffering on our ministry and it is a good one.

As we experience this suffering, instead of our lives overflowing with overpriced extras that highlight our progress, we start to look more like the pared down, rock-bottom-priced car that the salesman keeps hidden in the back. We find ourselves relying on Christ for even our most basic needs. That stripped-down model is the Paul who is writing this letter from a jail cell.

Ministry brings suffering into our lives. It is the hardest gift for us to accept from God. None of us enjoys suffering and it is one aspect of ministry we are always trying to avoid. God brings his gift of suffering and our response is to begin negotiating for a different one. We want to return this gift for one we think would better meet our needs. This is why Paul's description of himself in Philippians 3 is so startling. We are attracted and repelled by it. We want his passion for Christ. We identify with his desire to know Christ and the power of his resurrection, but to share in the fellowship of Christ's sufferings is frightening. We struggle to believe that God would love us with the amazing-big-crazy-love we sing about, but at the same time bring suffering into our lives, especially ongoing suffering. Why does our heavenly Father seem at times to be steadily

shoveling suffering into the lives of those he loves so deeply, when he could easily relieve it?

When our children struggled with reentry into American culture after life overseas as missionary kids, it was easy for me to be disappointed with God's performance. Until my children began to falter, I was oblivious to my expectations that God would provide a smooth path for them through the transitions of school and culture. After all, we had taken our family overseas for missionary work! All of us were often confused about the difficulties they faced and God's apparent silence in response to our desperate prayers. Our missionary choice brought deep suffering into our lives and the lives of our children.

Suffering is a tough beginning for a book about ministry, but like Paul, everyone I know who follows Christ into ministry suffers for their choice. Yet no one enjoys suffering. Our society works hard to avoid it and this fits well with our own desires. Even when we endure suffering, it is often for our own ends, like dieting to get into our skinny jeans. I have known people who have gone to remote mission fields to protect their children from the influences of American culture. Such decisions may cause suffering, but they are not how we share in the sufferings of Christ. We share in Christ's suffering as we suffer so that others may hear his gospel.

Because we are in ministry, our marriages, families, and personal lives are all affected by suffering. Great harm is done to our faith when this suffering surprises us. When God did not care for our children in the ways we anticipated, our faith was shaken. Great harm is done to our faith when suffering as a result of ministry is minimized or ignored—we kept making excuses for God rather than just admitting that we had no idea what he was doing. Rather than being derailed by suffering, Paul's faith was strengthened by it. An interesting aspect of Philippians 3, interwoven as it is with suffering, is that Paul does not present his suffering as an

unfortunate result of ministry, but as a door to deeper identification with Christ.

Paul found that his suffering for the sake of the gospel brought him closer to Christ. If Paul's goal had been a worry-free life, he would have begrudged the suffering God's call brought him. But since Paul's goal was to know Christ, he experienced his suffering as a way to know many aspects of Christ that he would have otherwise missed. As we suffer the effects of laying down our lives for others, we need the comfort that only comes from Christ. We seek him out because he understands. We feel his mercy. When the burdens of others threaten to crush us, we hear the words of Christ, who comes alongside us to bear the weight of the yoke he has asked us to carry. We ponder this tender Christ.

We are forced by our suffering to wrestle with his teachings because we need to hear his voice to survive the confusion ministry brings. Only suffering makes us desperate enough to knock on the door of heaven until someone gives us an answer (Luke 11:5–13). We knock until our Father opens his door and welcomes us with his love and peace. Suffering keeps us from a life of glib answers and leads us into a life of listening to his Spirit. Jesus knew everything, but he was not a know-it-all. Suffering opens our eyes to the glory of our humble Savior. This is why Paul's letter to the Philippians overflows with joy—not at all what we would expect given Paul's circumstances! He knew this glorious Christ.

Paul is also confident and full of joy even as he suffers because he does not fear that his suffering is a result of God's inattention or displeasure. Suffering is a necessary cost of bringing the gospel to the nations. If we have placed our faith in Christ, we are safe in his righteousness and need never fear that our suffering is a result of his rejection or inattention. Rather, we can see our suffering as the cost of moving his kingdom forward and an open door into his presence.

As our kids struggled with reentry into the States and as we, still in Ireland, struggled with our helplessness to make life work for them, our combined suffering caused me to doubt God's goodness and love. Eventually I saw that I had been judging God to be unloving and unfaithful. As I began to confess as sin the audacious stance I had taken against him, I heard Christ's words of forgiveness and love and my heart began to soften. I saw that much of my devotion to God was contingent on his willingness to do things my way. Suffering became a door for me into the presence of Christ as he really is, not as I expected him to be.

We will never know what life would have been like for our family if we had not entered ministry, but we know we have all paid a price in suffering. The joy comes when we realize that our suffering is not random, but rather connects us to Christ. Then we can trust him to use our suffering to accomplish his ends. We may not understand how our suffering fits into his redemptive plan, but we can be honest about it. We can bring our suffering to Christ just as Paul did. Paul's suffering was real and extensive, but it did not define him, make him bitter, or cause him to doubt God's love or call on his life. Paul's suffering brought him into deeper fellowship with Jesus.

If our experience of Christ's love and gift of righteousness has little impact on our response to suffering, it may be time to take our spiritual pulse. How much of Christ have we come to know? Paul is not referring to knowledge *about* Christ in Philippians 3, but of a personal relationship *with* Christ. Has the gift of righteousness you have by faith in Christ given you firm ground on which to stand? Do you feel God's welcome as you approach his throne? Are you confident in his goodness and love even as you suffer? It is good to acknowledge the difficulties of ministry life, but they are not what give our lives meaning. If suffering has made us bitter, caused us to doubt Christ's love, or question his call on our lives, we need to look again at the ground we are standing on. Jesus did everything

necessary to give us right standing with God. We are now God's children, part of his family with all the joys and benefits this brings. As we spend time with him, Christ will work a deeper assurance in our hearts that this is true—not just for others, but also for us. The benefits of his righteousness will work their way into our lives and give us the ability to endure suffering with joy, because our suffering connects us to Christ and all of his resources.

All of our needs are met and all of the promises of God are fulfilled in Christ, but we have to take hold of him by faith. We have to believe for *this* moment, even when it is difficult. We must join Paul in saying that yesterday's successes and failures are of no value to us (Philippians 3:7–8). This is where the rubber meets the road in regards to faith. Will I hold onto my hard-fought successes as the basis for my confidence? Or will I wallow in my failures and see myself as valueless to the kingdom?

There is no room in us for Christ if we are full of our successes. Likewise, there is no room in us for Christ if we are full of our failures. If we want to experience Christ's presence today, we must let go of all of our works, both good and bad. As believers, we have a moment-by-moment choice to decide whose work will define us. If we choose our own, we will find ourselves alone, filled with the pride of our successes or the despair of our failures. When we are able to rest in Christ's work for us (a righteousness from God that depends on faith), we will have space for Christ to dwell in every part of our lives.

Our experiences of the power of Christ's resurrection *and* the depth of fellowship we share in his sufferings are both necessary for ministry. Jesus moves his kingdom forward through us in both ways. When he displays his resurrection power through us as he answers our prayers, changes us visibly, and causes things to happen that are beyond what we could do, his kingdom moves forward. As we take up our crosses and give ourselves for others, thus sharing in his sufferings, Christ comes to us and we experience a

deep fellowship with him. Through our suffering his kingdom also moves forward. The fellowship we have with Christ as he comforts us in suffering loosens our grip on this world, grounds our testimony in truth, and opens a conduit through which his Spirit can flow.

Paul was an amazing man, but even he was not up to the task he was given. How did he persevere through all the hardship and resistance he faced? How can we? The answer for Paul is the answer for us: *He no longer trusted in his ability to keep the law for his justification, rather he trusted in Christ to receive the gift of righteousness that he could not earn by his good works.* All the confidence he could have had in his brilliance, his knowledge of God's law, his religious pedigree and his Pharisaical zeal were put aside. Paul gave up everything to know Christ and to make him known. As we too begin to grasp that Jesus is our righteousness, we will be changed and given courage to step into ministry. Our source of strength is Christ's work for us.

It wasn't until I began to believe that God was no longer grading my performance—because Christ had been *graded* for me—that I began to realize the uniqueness of the gifts God had given me and how those gifts complemented Josiah's gifts. As long as I was trying to emulate the way God used Josiah and the women in ministry that I admired, I was a complete failure. When I began to appreciate that Christ had many ways of working and that my mix of gifts and abilities were useful tools in his hand, I was free to see how he had used me in the past. I could find great hope in his willingness to use me in the present and the future. Much of our struggle and unbelief come because we do not see the way God sees. Standing in the righteousness of Christ gives us God's perspective and strengthens us for all that comes our way.

We see from Paul's overflow of joy that he understood Christ's words when he encouraged his disciples to rejoice—not in a powerful ministry where demons were subject to them, but in the

certainty that their names were written in heaven (Luke 10:20), thereby proving they belonged to him. We are not defined by ministry success or failure but by our inclusion into God's family. The strength, joy, and ability we need to persevere in ministry come, not from the ministry the Spirit produces through us, but from our belonging to God.

Jesus's purpose in calling us into ministry is to gather his people. His call gives definition and meaning to all of life. He does not call us into a job that is reasonable for us to manage or a job too big for us to handle. Rather, he puts us in a place where we will need him every day. Christ wants us to feel our need so that we will come to him. He knows that as our thoughts and emotions are full of him and as our faith is connected to him, his kingdom will move forward through us in ways we could never have imagined or done on our own. In his presence our focus turns away from ourselves toward the world he loves. We are filled with joy because we are his. We can awaken each morning knowing that he will meet us where we are and work through the smallest of faiths—a grain of mustard seed—to grow his kingdom into the largest of trees (Luke 13:19). Jesus invites us into the gathering of his people. Are *you* ready for some ministry?