



Finding Balance and Perspective in the Ministry

by Rev. Dr. Tyler C. Arnold

INTRODUCTION (FOCUS)

The devil loves to create discord in the hearts of pastors. He attacks the conscience with nagging questions like: What if I'm not doing enough? What if things never get back to normal? What if I fail to fulfill my calling through this crisis?

These are the sorts of questions that skew balance (emotional and spiritual well-being) in the pastor's life and ministry. This thinking directs our focus inward and tilts our ministerial perspective toward our own capabilities. As servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries, we have nothing that originates inside of us to heal our wounded hearts or calm our anxious lives. Nothing that dwells within us can bring hope to the sick and comfort to those who mourn.

So, where do we begin to rectify challenges such as fear, grief and despair created by life-changing events in our world that have left pastors and those they serve "out of balance"?

BALANCE THROUGH REPENTANCE

We begin with the fact that the Christian life is one of daily repentance — a baptismal life of dying and rising with Christ. Life is filled with death, and this comes in many forms: suffering, anxiety, and even the actual death of others. The obvious reality is, we live in a fallen world where we know how fragile life can be. We are dust and to dust we shall return. And, when sufferings increase, we become more aware of this world's tragic state of affairs. The Christian life of repentance does not call us to avoid these sufferings but rather shows us how we have hope in our grief. These disturbing times threaten to crush our spirits. But God's promise of hope is found in the bold confidence that He will provide what we need when there seems to be no end to the tragic news.

Q1. Stewards are caretakers of that which God calls sacred. Read 1 Corinthians 4:1–4. With what are the “stewards” entrusted (v. 1–2)?

A1. The stewards are entrusted with the mysteries of God — the Sacraments. Take note that stewards are only called to faithfully administer what God has entrusted to them. Pastors may struggle to find balance during times of significant change. However, they are not called to be stewards of more than God has called them to be. Keeping this central thought in mind through this study will help pastors realize that their vocations remain the same although the function of those vocations may change.

Q2. Read 2 Corinthians 3:4–5. When pastors feel inadequate, what does God remind them?

A2. God reminds pastors and all Christians that we are not sufficient in ourselves. We’ve got nothing whatsoever inside of us that gives hope amid despair or heals what is broken. Our sufficiency only comes through Christ.

Q3. How are daily repentance and Baptism connected? Why should pastors and all Christians begin with repentance? Read Ephesians 4:22 and 2 Corinthians 5:17.

A3. Repentance is turning to our Lord — He turns us to Him. It’s our sinful inclination to listen to our own voices of self-doubt, insufficiency and failure. We should not listen to our voices, or the voice of the devil, who seeks to wreak havoc on our conscience and tells us lies about what makes for success.

KEEPING THE CHALLENGES IN PERSPECTIVE: JOY AND THANKSGIVING AMID CHAOS

Pandemics create instability for the self, our families, the church and the whole of society. The Bible gives us direction on how we are to approach such difficulties. Rather than resigning ourselves to impending tragedy, the Word of God suggests a thankful heart. St. Paul says, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thess. 5:16–18).

When we are faced with difficulties, we understand the part about prayer. But what about rejoicing and giving thanks? In times of adversity, joy and thanksgiving don’t come so naturally.

We confuse joy with happiness. We don’t understand, or we forget, that joy can coexist with sadness. Joy is so much more than a feeling tied to emotions that might ebb and flow from one day to another. Rather, it is rooted in God’s promises. Thanksgiving, likewise, is a challenge during difficult times. However, if thanksgiving, like joy, is tied to God’s will in Christ Jesus, then even in these uncertainties we face today we can have confidence that we remain firmly in God’s grace.

Q4. Read 2 Corinthians 1:3–9. How does Paul speak of comfort amid affliction to the church in Corinth?

A4. Paul speaks of God’s comfort as coming to the afflicted not to relieve suffering or pain but rather to bestow a promise: the deliverance from death. Notice how Paul includes himself in the sufferings: “For we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings...” Sharing in affliction puts us in good company with our fellow pastors, Christians and especially our Savior. Christ’s sufferings consume our sufferings as we bear His cross in good times and in bad. Suffering and affliction are never undone, but they are out-matched. That’s the promise Jesus makes for us and the reality we as Christians live in right now.

Q5. Read Philippians 1:3–11 and Colossians 1:3–14. Notice how Paul begins his letters with thanksgiving and prayer. Also, take note of how Paul remains thankful even during difficult times (imprisonment, persecution, etc.). How does Paul make a connection between himself and those who receive these epistles?

A5. In Philippians, Paul mentions that he holds them in his heart, for they are partakers of God's grace with him (v.7). In Colossians, he says that God has delivered them from the domain of darkness and transferred them to the kingdom of His beloved Son (v.13). The idea that Christ remains with all the workers in the vineyard and that all Christians can find comfort in knowing that we are not alone continues throughout Paul's message to the churches. God continues to give strength through the means of grace and through fellow pastors and believers as well.

Even though God professes His undying love for us, He never promises us an easy way. He never promises us a perfect "balance." In fact, the opposite is true. Jesus warns us: "In the world you will have tribulation" (John 16:33). This fallen world is a long way from the perfection God intended. However, we trust that all things (including suffering and death) work together for good, to draw us closer to God.

Q6. How can we learn, and teach others to learn, dependence on God?

A6. God continues to give His creation daily bread, yet we so easily forget to give thanks for everything we need to support our body and life. We are reminded in Mathew 10:30–31 that even the hairs of our head are numbered and we are more valuable than many sparrows. Our plight may cause us to forget such things. But it was only for us that the Father gave His only Son. A balanced life recognizes that we must continue to depend on God, the only source of all blessings.

This fallen world and our own sinfulness mean that the life of Christians will inevitably be "thrown out of balance." Jesus does not promise us perfect balance — not in this life. But He does offer us peace. His peace is the peace of knowing that He has the situation in hand. This peace reminds us that God's presence never leaves us and that, amid the chaos, He gives us a true and lasting promise that will see us through. In a world that experiences a tremendous amount of change, God's peace given through love never changes. Thanks be to God.

Q7. Read Habakkuk 3:17–19 and Philippians 4:7. How does God's peace give us comfort in times of calamity?

A7. God's peace remains even when "the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls" (v. 17). It's hard to imagine peace when our circumstances make us so anxious. That's why Paul says in Philippians that God's peace surpasses ALL understanding. His peace is beyond comprehension. As mentioned before, peace is attached to promise and not feeling. So, amid difficult times, we still have God's peace. This gives us hope, knowing that God's peace will endure beyond our troubling experiences.

A PATH FORWARD (CONNECT)

Recovery in the wake of a national catastrophe takes time. Fear was prevalent when this pandemic began, and it still lingers today. Pastors and congregations are antsy to get back to normal. And getting back to normal is more complicated than we realize.

Pastors are feeling pressure from all sides. Criticisms may have come from fellow brothers in the ministry or from congregants. But, beloved in the Lord, keep these criticisms in perspective. Difficult situations bring emotions to the surface and such things are expected. But here's the cold hard truth: You can only do what you are given to do.

Never take credit for your success and never take blame for your perceived failures. Remain faithful to Jesus. Pastors are called to do His bidding. Everything else will run its course. Living within the bounds of what God has called pastors (and husbands, fathers, etc.) to do will help keep the proper balance and the correct perspective on ministry.

Here is a breakdown of a few balance and perspective pointers mentioned in this study that will help pastors navigate these days of testing:

- **Cultivate humility:** Be kind, tenderhearted and forgiving (Ephesians 4:32).
- **Promote collegiality among the brotherhood:** Set an example of concern and support for fellow pastors.
- **Be a voice of reason** and calm pastoral judgment in all your communications with parishioners and pastors alike. We may not know exactly what lies ahead, but Christ Jesus has got this!
- **Seek counsel:** You are not a solo entrepreneur — when faced with unprecedented circumstances, ask your circuit brothers for advice, then proceed collectively.
- **Encourage:** All things are sanctified by Word and prayer (1 Timothy 4:5) — your sheep and lambs are fearful, anxious, frustrated and worried. Point them to God's promises; always be eager to pray and bless.
- **Mind your first vocation:** Parsonages are not immune to tension and distress. Use these days to plow new ground at home, set aside time for your wife and kids and devise new ways to build the bond of peace in your home.
- **Tend to your soul.** Unplug from media and distractions each day for immersion in God's Word and prayer. Get off by yourself and if you can read and pray out loud. Then, listen not only with your ears but your heart as well.¹

Q8. Based on the list above, what measures might be the most meaningful/helpful for you to implement amid these challenging times?

A8. Answers will vary. Some of these pointers may be more meaningful than others. Focus answers on practical ways individual pastors may implement these suggestions within their family/ministry contexts.

Q9. Discuss how this study has helped you gain a better perspective on finding balance within life and ministry today. How can we work together to achieve our goals?

A9. Answers will vary. The discussion should include personal goals that can be shared with the group.

¹ These pointers are based on a DOXOLOGY email sent out by the Rev. Dr. Harold Senkbeil on April 24, 2020. They are used by permission of the author.

PRAYER:

Dear Heavenly Father, guard our hearts and our lives. Give us the strength through the work of Your Holy Spirit to endure the sufferings that often fall upon us. Thwart the activity of the Evil One who tries to separate us from Christ, from our fellow brothers in the ministry, from our congregations and families. Give us strength to endure the frustration and fatigue. Grant us peaceful hearts and a calm spirit to know that Your promises never end, no matter what challenges lay ahead of us. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.