

The Scriptures in the Leadership Journey

By: Juan Prestol-Puesan, Ph.D.

When Jacinta Ardern, Prime Minister of New Zealand, announced her decision not to continue in office it saddened many around the world. Among the reasons she expressed for leaving office the following stood out: “You cannot and should not do the job unless you have enough in the tank to do the job justice.”¹ How true it is. Running a country with less than a full charge of energy is not a good idea, but how do we prevent it from happening to us? Even more so, could the study of Scripture help Adventist leaders from running aground, and how could it shape our journey? Did it shape my leadership journey?

At times I questioned if my pilgrimage, with family background, culture, education, emotional intelligence issues, and experience, resembled that of leaders found in Scripture, and, if the experience of those in Scripture could serve as a guide to my own experience?

The God of the Scriptures

When word of the Lord came to Jeremiah the Prophet² he was told the Lord

- Formed him in the womb,
- Knew him,
- Sanctified him, and
- Ordained him as a prophet to the nations

These four divine acts had been done before the prophet had been even conceived in his mother’s womb, leaving no room for equivocation about God’s purpose for him. The Scriptures assure me that the foreknowledge of God is so complete and thorough that all the genetic elements that make me the way I am, were known by Him before they were brought together to make me who I am.³

The Scriptures and the Spiritual Journey

Leaders often bear pain and affliction as they relate to people and issues, and at the same time are expected to keep moving forward. Dealing with doubt, discouragement, and disappointment while continuing to move forward is a requirement of the trade.⁴ Fortunately the Scriptures are a great source of strength, encouragement, balance, and

¹ Jacinta Ardern became New Zealand’s third female leader and, at age 37, one of the youngest in the world. She gave birth while in office. Reelected in 2020 she imposed some of the world’s strictest border rules for almost two years. <https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/18/asia/new-zealand-jacinda-ardern-not-seeking-reelection-intl-hnk/index.html>.

² Jeremiah 1:4, 5 NKJV.

³ Psalm 139:13, 16, 23. NKJV.

⁴ Proverbs 4:23 NKJV reads “Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life.”

illumination, much as the Psalmist wrote “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” (Psalm 119:105). The value of returning to the Scriptures is because “the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword even to the division of soul, and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart”,⁵ and the Scripture reproofs, corrects, instructs, and equips.⁶

A.W. Tozer’s definition of who is a leader has remained one of my favorites. He wrote “A true and safe leader is likely to be one who has no desire to lead but is forced into a position of leadership by the inward pressure of the Holy Spirit and the press of the external situation.”⁷ As our journey began, when the invitations of the Spirit brought us closer to God, even before we were made fully aware that it was Him speaking to us, His presence and influence kept growing in us until it became clear.

Your election as a fiduciary may have recently occurred, but your journey as a leader began before you were even aware of His calling, and long before you heard His voice telling you that the fullness of time had arrived for you to serve Him. As you accept, you may see that becoming a leader produced in your inner soul a sincere excitement, optimism, multiple life adjustments, perhaps conflict, and affliction, culminating in peace and trust. In that process, the word of God is your best guide to Jesus, His message, and His mission.

In James 1:21 we find the counsel “Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.” The Greek word “implanted” is ἐμφυτός (émphutos) which means *engrafted from another source*.⁸ It is the

⁵ Hebrews 4:12 NKJV. The word cuts, penetrates, and discerns the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

⁶ 2 Timothy 3:16, 17 NKJV. The word is profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction.

⁷ Here is a more complete Tozer’s quote. “A true and safe leader is likely to be one who has no desire to lead but is forced into a position of leadership by the inward pressure of the Holy Spirit and the press of the external situation...I believe it might be accepted as a fairly reliable rule of thumb that the man who is ambitious to lead is disqualified as a leader. The true leader will have no desire to lord it over God’s heritage, but will be humble, gentle, self-sacrificing, and altogether as ready to follow as to lead, when the Spirit makes it clear that a wiser and more gifted man than himself has appeared.” A.W. Tozer, as quoted by Charles Swindoll in his book “Moses”, p.62. <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/652988-a-true-and-safe-leader-is-likely-to-be-one>. The writer acknowledges there is more to the conversation about the calling of the Lord than what is covered in Tozer’s statement above. Refer to Acts 22:13-16 and also to the statement in 1 Timothy 3:1 “If a man desires a position of a bishop, he desires a good work.”

⁸ The Greek word is ἐμφυτός (émphutos) (G1721) meaning the word is inborn, implanted, engrafted from another source, the gospel being here represented under the figure of a seed or shoot implanted or engrafted, as elsewhere by seed sown [cf. Mark 4:14ff.]. Zodiates, S. (2000). In [*The complete word study dictionary: New Testament*](#) (electronic ed.). AMG Publishers. Also, we found that Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown commented “the Gospel word, whose proper attribute is to be engrafted by the Holy Spirit, to be livingly incorporated with the believer, as the fruitful shoot is with the wild natural stock on which it is engrafted. The law came to man only from without and admonished him of his duty. The Gospel is engrafted inwardly, and so fulfils the ultimate design of the law (De 6:6; 11:18; Ps 119:11).” Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997). [*Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*](#) (Vol. 2, p. 486). Logos Research Systems, Inc.

work of the Holy Spirit through the Scripture as it has been implanted in the mind and the heart that makes the man of God “complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.”⁹ In this regard, Ellen G. White wrote of the Bible “I have found it to be the voice of God to my soul.”¹⁰

Lessons of the Scriptures in My Leadership Journey

Earlier in my service, I was not aware of the importance of reflecting and interpreting my experience to learn from my mistakes and I did not obtain the benefit of my errors. Later in life, having engaged in reflection and having other tools in my toolbox, I discovered that the stories of the Bible shed valuable insight into my own journey, particularly in moments of loneliness, discouragement, and hopelessness. The burden and affliction the leaders in Scripture suffered, have helped me understand my own. I found no better way of dealing with loneliness, doubt, and discouragement than by returning to the Scriptures for renewed inspiration and encouragement.

The Lord knows me, inside and out, and like He did with prophet Jeremiah, He took special interest in me, so much so that He separated me for holy use before my birth. And He saw what my leadership function would be before my life on this earth began. Such foreknowledge tells me that I am not a leader by accident. Such knowledge tells me that God *knows* me well, and that He called me to His work.

J. Robert Clinton called leadership “a lifetime of lessons,”¹¹ and leadership is a spiritual journey in which we surrender ourselves, and our professional skills in service to the Lord, placing all in the hands of the church in service. Scripture shares multiple examples that help us understand our journey and validate our experience.¹² Here is a bouquet of lessons selected from my reading of Scripture that helped me along my leadership journey.

1 Jesus is preeminent – The person, the message, the mission.¹³

⁹ 2 Timothy 3:17 NKJV reads “that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

¹⁰ E.G. White. *Steps to Christ*, p. 112. Review and Herald Publishing Association.

¹¹ J. Robert Clinton. *The Making of a Leader*, p.40. NAVPRESS, P.O. Box 6000, Colorado Springs, Colorado 80934.

¹² Review the experience of leaders mentioned in Scripture in Exodus 3:1-22; Joshua 1:5-9; 3:7; 4:14; 1 Samuel 3:1-21; 16:1-13; Nehemiah 2:1-12; Isaiah 5:1-13; **Jeremiah 1:4,5**; Ezekiel 1:1-28; 2:1-10; Daniel 1:17; 12:13; Acts 9:1-9; Galatians 1:11-20. All texts from NKJV. Also, review the portions outlined below from bible texts included below: 2 Peter 1:19-21 NKJV reads “And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for *prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.*” 2 Tim. 2:15 NKJV reads “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, *rightly dividing the word of truth.*” 2 Tim. 3:15 NKJV reads “and that from childhood you have known *the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.*”

¹³ John 1:1-3; 15:1-5; John chapters 16 and 17; 1 Peter 1:13; Revelation 22:13.

- 2 He calls us – You are not a leader by accident. If God called you, He would sustain you.¹⁴
- 3 Perfection is not required to serve - An imperfect and committed Leader will do just fine.¹⁵
- 4 Beware of the Enemy - He will try to destroy you.¹⁶
- 5 Remove ego from your decisions – Treat success as perfume - smell it - don't swallow it.¹⁷
- 6 Lessons learned from failures and afflictions are transformational – Reflect on them.¹⁸
- 7 Prayer and communion through the Scriptures are not optional – Remain grounded.¹⁹
- 8 Be a good listener – You will go farther when you listen more and talk less.²⁰
- 9 Trust in the Lord of Mission – Rest on Him.²¹
- 10 When your time to lead comes to an end, leave gracefully, act ethically, and support your successor.²²

¹⁴ 1 Peter 1:15-17. Rock, C.B. Church Leadership: A Call to Virtue. Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1990. ISBN 0-8163-0859-4. Dr. Rock clearly stated in the introduction of his book that “the mechanics and techniques of leadership already available on the shelves of bookstores, libraries, (and we may add databases and other online resources available today), ignore the correlation between personal integrity and institutional effectiveness.” He affirmed that “character, not technical skills, corresponds more closely with productivity, and that it is easier to improve technical ability than it is to teach personal ethics.” Page 7. Yet, one might add, character without effectiveness is also lacking.

¹⁵ James 1:5-8; Phil. 4:19-21. Don S. Schneider, then president of the North American Division told me once “Juan, you don't need to be perfect for me to support you.” His statement revealed an aspect of grace and forgiveness in leadership I had not seen before. Leaders are imperfect and need forgiveness when they make mistakes.

¹⁶ Job 1:6-12; Numbers 20:10-13; Deut. 3:23-28. Moses stroke the rock twice in anger and frustration, and against divine guidance in a moment of defeat and failure.

¹⁷ Romans 12:3 NKJV “...not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith.”

¹⁸ Judges 16:28; Psalm 34:19; 50:15; 1 Cor. 10:13; 2 Cor. 4:16, 17; 12:9; Hebrews 12:1. The writer of these notes believes Moses wrote the books of Job and Genesis during his desert years in Midian, when his leadership role was placed on hold for 40 years. The stories in these books on the experiences of Adam, Job, Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph have in common they had everything, lost everything, and by divine grace they were made whole. His reflections on these stories may reflect his desire that God would accomplish the purpose for which he was born.

¹⁹ 2 Tim. 3:17; 1 Thessalonians 5:17 NKJV “Pray without ceasing.” Ellen G. White affirms “Satan cannot overcome him whose heart is thus stayed upon God.” Steps to Christ, p. 98.

²⁰ Isaiah 30:19-21. Remember that “...when you are in danger of unconsciously doing wrong and exerting an influence which will lead others to do wrong, your guardian angel will be by your side, prompting you to a better course, choosing your words for you, and influencing your actions.” White. Testimonies 3, p.363, 364. Also, Ellen G. White testified “the darkness of the evil one encloses those who neglect to pray.” Steps to Christ, page 94.

²¹ Psalm 119:16; Isaiah 26:3,4; Jeremiah 17:7,8. “The heart that rests most fully upon Christ will be most earnest and active in labor for Him.” Whited. Steps to Christ, p.70. Review and Herald Publishing Association. ISBN 978-08280-1699-5.

²² John 3:30 NKJV John the Baptist told his disciples about Jesus “He must increase, but I must decrease.” Here is another view of Tozer's quote: “The true leader will have no desire to lord it over God's heritage, but will be humble, gentle, self-sacrificing, and altogether as ready to follow as to lead, when the Spirit makes it clear that a wiser and more gifted man than himself has appeared.” A.W. Tozer, as quoted by

I encourage you to make the Scriptures a guide for your journey and to create your own list of lessons. Welcome to the ranks of elected Adventist leaders who are called to serve and experience the joys, the blessings, and the challenges of working for His church. May you find solace, consolation, guidance, and illumination in the Scriptures for they testify of Him,²³ and affirm you in your journey.²⁴ [END].

Juan R. Prestol-Puesán, PhD

Charles Swindoll in his book “Moses”, p.62. Also, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/652988-a-true-and-safe-leader-is-likely-to-be-one>.

²³ John 5:39 NKJV – “You search the Scriptures, of in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me.”

²⁴ James 1:21 NKJV – “Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.”