

Pastoral PTSD

October 28, 2015 by [J.A. Medders](#)

Pastor Ted plops down in his peeling “leather” office chair, opens his Gmail, swigs his Coke Zero, and reads a two-sentence email from a church member: “Hey, can we meet? I’d like to talk you about something.” Depending on the state of Ted’s heart, he will either be encouraged or exhausted—maybe worried fearful of what’s about to happen.

I’ve been Pastor Ted. Have you?

The Common Pain of Being a Pastor

It’s not uncommon for pastors to have lurking suspicions toward vague and brief requests for a meeting. Why? Well, many pastors have shrapnel and scars from the ministry. When a pastor goes through a storage unit of skirmishes, he might pick up a flinch along the way. Pastors who have been through the fire, the storm, and the hard fought battles—some needed, others ugly and unbiblical—will often come down with this peculiar lack of faith. While I’ve never played a doctor on television, I have a diagnosis: I call it Pastoral Post-traumatic Stress Disorder.

Here’s my trauma. At twenty-five years old I became the Lead Pastor of a two-year old church plant. I had no idea I was placing my heart on an ant-bed. While I was already a part of the church, no one expected I’d become the Lead Pastor they were searching for. Nor did I. Dozens of families peacefully left the church after I was installed; it’s like they heard the fat lady sing. I would be lying if I didn’t say it bothered me. But I get why they left. Most of them had been married longer than I had been alive. I was a whippersnapper. But this isn’t what shellshocked me. My church became a street-fight and I wasn’t ready. As if it weren’t bad enough that people left by the dozens and the church finances went cliff diving in shallow water, the personal attacks were jarring.

Here Are My Scars

I’ll never forget when a well respected man in our church and city, came to my office to chat. It was an ambush. Before I knew it, he’s calling me arrogant for not agreeing with him that Adam of Eden wasn’t a real person. “I thought you’d be different and listen to older guys?” He goes on to say how he doesn’t like how I became the Lead Pastor of his church. I can say that I wasn’t too thrilled myself with the position in that moment either! “I’m only staying because I have friends here,” he said. “I can’t imagine you’ll make it anyways.”

One lady wrote to me in an email, even though she said she didn’t mean to be rude, “You are all about yourself. You don’t care about people wanting to know Jesus.”

I remember getting groceries with my daughter when another woman came up to me and said, “I liked going to your church, but you were just too young for us. My husband just couldn’t respect you.” And this was after former members were avoiding me on the previous aisle.

A small group leader eventually left the church because my wife didn’t wave back to him—or see him—while she was chasing our daughter across the cafetorium of the Junior High.

One man stood by my side and advocated for me during the interview process to become the Lead Pastor, only to pull the Benedict Arnold option after my ordination, spreading gossip and doubt among the church.

I could go further, but I think you get the point: Christians, who I thought you were my friends, made me their enemy. Pastoring became a game of Minesweeper. Meeting here, counseling there, going well, and then kaboom. Reset. Bang.

One day, it all came crashing down. I couldn't do it anymore. I was sick of crawling through the razor-wire of pastoral ministry. While crying in my car, I managed to mumble out a prayer, "Lord, I can't do this anymore. Would you please do something? I won't make it, this church won't make it, unless you do something."

He did. He heard my mumble. The church finances recovered. The troops retreated. But once the dust settled, I already learned a new set of unfortunate skills for the next couple of years of pastoral ministry. Similar to signs in a parking lot: hide, take, lock. Hide in my office, take precautions, and lock the door. I began to pull back from the sheep, fearing their bark and bite. I locked myself away in my study, only taking the time to pastor the people that I knew weren't a risk.

Whenever an email, a text, or a quick, "Can we get together this week?" was tossed my way, I immediately ducked for cover. I could feel my heart recoil and my soul would get uneasy. *What are they upset about? What did I do? Are they leaving? I bet they are leaving.* This reflex paralyzed me. I became like one of Pavlov's dogs. Whenever I heard the meeting bell ring, I prepared for another disappointing and painful encounter—even if it weren't true. A full-scale retreat was in motion. Everything felt like a crisis. Everything made me cringe.

Have you been there? Are you there?

Staring Fear In The Face

Not surprisingly, this disorder in my heart led to disorder in my ministry. I found it difficult to connect with people in the church. They felt like potential spies, waiting to execute their orders. "Et tu Brute?" I thought I was surrounded by a bunch of Brutuses instead of Barnabases. While I used to be outgoing, extroverted and playful, I became guarded, introverted, crusty. I didn't have problems enjoying the company of other pastors and leaders outside of our church. I knew they weren't out to get me. I trusted them. I knew we were on the same team. We are in similar trenches. But it was the Sunday morning worship service that felt like walking through a haunted house.

I wasn't mature enough to admit it then, but looking back, I feared the people in our church. For about 3 years, I was terrified of them and hid it by faking toughness, "I don't care what anyone thinks of me." But of course I did. We all do to a certain degree. My heart and mind developed an allergic reaction to the sheep. The closer they got, the itchier I became. I was scared. Some of the sheep seemed like KGB operatives, while others really were kindness in animation.

After 3 years of war, the conflict was purged from the land. The church was experiencing the peace of God, but I was still uneasy. The flinch abideth. Whenever a new, gracious, and supportive church member wanted to get lunch, my stomach would turn. Even though no one gave me an inkling that an insurrection was coming over a salad, it didn't matter. I was suspicious. I was fearful. I was lacking love. Something was wrong. Something was wrong with me. I became a man of little faith.

His Power Is Perfect In Our Weakness

The reason a pastoral flinch took residence in my heart is that I ceased to believe God's grace was enough for me in all of these things. Paul endured more difficulties and ministry battles than I can fathom. He asked the Lord to make it easier on him, and what did our Lord say?

“Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:8–10).

In the wake of attacks, insults and calamities, I failed to believe what we teach little children. I am weak but he is strong. Therefore, I am strong because his power is made perfect in my weakness. I didn’t believe the Lord was at work in me.

Faith is the antidote to pastoral PTSD.

The gospel and the gospel’s glorious gifts bring rejuvenating sanity to pastors. Once 2 Cor. 12:8–10 began to rest on my heart and mind, I could look back at the first three years of my ministry and not refer to it as the First Baptist Chernobyl. I could look back with contentment and thanksgiving—and even, “Boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.” God refined me in those years.

The Gospel Is Your Sanity

As soon as I stared my lack of faith in the face, it began to flee. Joy returned as soon as I believed my identity in Christ is more valuable and precious than my ideas of what ministry should be like. My grip loosened on my dreams, and my hands were raised in praise to him. When I began to have faith that all things are working together for good (Rom. 8:28) and that a mob of angry church folk can’t separate me from the love of Christ (Rom. 8:35), excitement and eagerness bloomed again. The glory of Christ gave me faith in future grace to go out and provide, protect, feed, and shepherd his people. He never left me, and never will. I didn’t have to be afraid anymore; I’ve been crucified with Christ, and it’s no longer I who live, but Christ, who loves me and gave himself for me, lives in me (Gal. 2:20). The gospel I preached was—and is—the gospel I need.

Church members, please love your pastors. Honor your pastors—outdo them in showing honor (Rom. 12:10). Respect and esteem your pastors. “We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work” (1 Thess. 5:12–13). Pray for them. Make it a joy for them to pastor you.

Brother Pastor, if you suffering from what has happened to you. Do not fear. Put your trust in the one who’s handled your past, present, and future. You too have a faithful and sympathetic High Priest, the Man of Sorrows, that you point the sheep to. Cry out to him, “Be gracious to me, O God, for man tramples on me; all day long an attacker oppresses me; my enemies trample on me all day long, for many attack me proudly. When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me?” (Ps. 56:1–4).

God’s grace toward you is not in vain. He is your sanity, stability, and Savior. He himself will restore you, and empower you for where you are and what lies ahead. “After you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen” (1 Peter 5:10–11). May the risen Christ strengthen you in your ministry for his glory, your good, and his church’s good.