

THE LION'S HONEY

Grace for flawed Christian leaders

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Introduction

God doesn't always choose regular men as leaders. Sometimes he opts for characters who are flawed, unusual and not those that the church would automatically light upon. It is as if the Lord takes a risk.

The pathway to the ministry has become quite standardized in recent years in the UK. When we look at the typical CV of candidates for leading a church, we are usually looking at young men from middle-class Christian homes who have been to university and perhaps spent some time in student work or in a respectable profession having, at some point, sailed through an accredited evangelical Bible college. There they are, scrubbed up nicely, raring to go and full of ideas. And there's nothing wrong with that.

Amazing grace

But some men upon whom God lays his hand are different. They don't come from a Christian family. Or if they do, it wasn't a good one. They may not have been to college. They

may have had a life on the streets. And before they were converted their way was one of which they are now ashamed and which has left them with ongoing struggles. Yet God has called them into ministry.

It does happen. Augustine of Hippo had a past life worthy of shocked tabloid headlines in any century and a Christian mother who, it seems, had a drink problem. John Newton wrote the much-loved gospel song *Amazing Grace* exactly because he was truly amazed that God should save and call into Christian service someone like himself with a wayward past and a background full of blasphemy and cursing in the awful trade of slavery and human trafficking. Yet, despite their scarlet sins, God claimed them and used them for his purposes.

Damaged goods

Our own sins always leave scars on us. These can go deep. There are also the bruises that come from being on the wrong end of other peoples' sins. No one has a perfect past or a perfect upbringing. So Christian leaders can be damaged goods. Furthermore, each of us, no matter how 'regular' we may appear outwardly, has his own weaknesses. And for some there are psychologically subterranean issues with which we struggle. Yes, thank God, we meet the requirements of character and behaviour set out in the New Testament for leaders in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. But some of us may have to work much harder than others to make the grade.

We have a wild side lurking within us, which can be dangerous to God's church. Though it is perhaps hidden

under a disguise of public godliness, untamed sin and the idols of the heart that lead to self-pity, over-bearing pride, perverse sexual temptations and other defective personality traits lie just beneath the surface. On his worst days, a Christian leader might actually be frightened of himself and what he is capable of, apart from God's grace. Here we are called to be a blessing to the church but we could so easily be the opposite.

How are we to deal with that? If you are such a Christian leader, what are you to do? We are people who love God but who know we are dangerously blemished.

Samson

Such thoughts lead us to think about the Old Testament hero Samson. It would be an understatement to call him 'unusual'. His life seems constantly stained by revenge and terrible moral failure. As we meet him in Scripture and consider his life we soon recognize him not only as a very powerful but also a very complex character. He was a remarkably gifted man but just as capable of bringing trouble on God's people as blessing (Judges 15:9–12). Physically and mentally strong, yet he was morally weak.

If you feel your weaknesses as a church leader, this book is for you. If you are aware you have serious issues that need addressing, keep reading.

Early on in my Christian life I recognized something of my own inner problems. And then God called me to be a preacher and a pastor! I was overjoyed but simultaneously

worried. Could I be the man God had called me to be? It felt pretty uncomfortable.

But a few years into my ministry, an assignment to study the life of Samson led to some vital discoveries. What I found made me much more aware of myself and of the particular areas where I needed the grace of God. Understanding this unusual and obviously defective man Samson has played no small part in keeping me in the ministry and, hopefully, not doing too much damage.

It is my hope that this short study of the life of Samson as a defective Christian leader will enable others to be honest, and to understand themselves and to persevere in fruitful ministry. We are going to start by thinking about how best to diagnose the flaws deep within our hearts.