

LEARNING FROM GREAT BIBLICAL LEADERS - John Sweetman

There were some great spiritual leaders in biblical times. In this article, John examines six of these leaders and draws out one characteristic from each that should inform our view of Christian leadership.

1. Abraham and Faith

We don't know much about Abraham's background. We do know that his family were idol worshippers (Josh. 24:2), so he did not grow up worshipping Yahweh. The names of his family and the fact that he grew up in Ur suggest that they were probably moon worshippers.

Somehow Abraham entered into a relationship with Yahweh who called him to risk everything by leaving his family and country to travel to and settle on the other side of the known world. He had to leave behind his land (and we know the attachment that such societies had to their land), his family support, his language, in fact everything that was familiar to him.

Oh Yahweh's call came with some great promises (see Gen. 12:2-3), but don't think that there wasn't a huge cost and risk for Abraham. He willingly ventured off into the unknown trusting that God's hand was on his life and that God would do as he had promised.

That's faith! No wonder Paul paints Abraham as the "father of those who have faith" (Rom. 4:11-12). He trusted God when there was little to go on. He had no history of God's work to check out. No he just believed God's promises and stepped out.

Some leaders are natural risk takers. They love doing something different. They don't worry hugely. They don't really fear failure. They enjoy situations where everything is on the line. They would rather take risks than play it safe. They can be scary to follow sometimes, but faith is no problem for them.

Most leaders are not like that. I'm certainly not. And I suspect that Abraham wasn't either judging by his reaction to some risky situations (Gen. 12:10-13; 20:1-2). (Oh the problems of being in love with a beautiful woman.)

But faith and risk are vital to Christian leadership. God calls us out of our comfort zone and asks us to lead people to a place that we ourselves don't know. Sometimes we fail. Abraham certainly didn't get it right every time. But as we hold on to God's promises and leading (by the skin of our teeth), we find ourselves trusting and believing God.

God may well be calling you to step out in faith. When you hear his voice, don't back out. It will be the start of a dangerous but incredible journey to a God-promised "land" you never dreamed of.

2. Moses and Perseverance

I'm writing about some of the best biblical leaders and drawing out one characteristic that made their leadership great. In this post, we look at Moses.

Moses had a brilliant preparation for leadership in Pharaoh's court. He would have had the best training and the best resources. But then he messed up his chance to make a difference, so that he couldn't really take a leadership role among his own people until he was 80. Kind of late to start. And by then he was really reluctant. Who could blame him? I plan to be well and truly retired by the time I'm 80.

But God convinced him that he was the person for the job, so he gave it a shot. Overall it went rather badly. Oh he did lead Israel out of Pharaoh's clutches, but that's as far as they got. The Israelites were a stubborn, lazy bunch of whingers who were almost impossible to lead. Well you have to see that they had been slaves for 400 years - they had less enterprise than the convicts who initially populated Australia - not much passion to make a difference there!

So for 40 years (that's right, Moses led until he was 120), they wandered around in the wilderness in the no-man's-land between affluent Egypt and fertile, but occupied, Canaan. They just kind of did nothing. God looked after them physically, but there wasn't really anything else to do. It was like a whole nation on unemployment benefits for life. They were supposed to invade Canaan, but they lacked the backbone. They sweated it out in the desert until God could weed the whingers out and raise up a courageous, new generation.

But they did have one sport - criticising the leader. Just about everyone had a shot at it. Yet Moses persevered. In one particular low time in my own leadership, when I was copping a fair bit of criticism, I did a study of Moses. It made me feel much better.

Yet despite the discouragement and frustrations, Moses persevered. He had his moments of course, but he wasn't going to abandon the task God had called him to. He never made it into Canaan, but he was there cheering them on to the end.

I once asked one of my mentors how he survived some of the critics and difficult people he had faced in leadership. He said to me, "I outlasted them!"

Don't give up. Hang in there. And if you need some encouragement, do a study of Moses. You will find that things could be worse.

I love Jesus' ultimate words to those who persevere in ministry: "Well done good and faithful steward."

3. Joshua and Courage

I'm writing about some of the best biblical leaders and drawing out one characteristic that made their leadership great. In this post, we look at Joshua.

Joshua took over the leadership of Israel from Moses. The whingers had died off, but the new generation was raw and inexperienced. Their life had been spent wandering around in a desert. They certainly weren't a well-trained, disciplined, experienced, fighting force. Oh by the time Joshua became leader they had fought in a few skirmishes, but still, the thought of invading and conquering a land of "powerful people" in "fortified cities" (Num. 13:28) must have seemed like a pipe-dream.

But Joshua was no ordinary leader. Forty years before, when he had originally spied out this new land of Canaan and seen the strength of the people living there, his response (with Caleb) had been, "We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it" (Num. 13:30). He was no shrinking violet. He was a man of courage.

Nothing had changed. Now standing on the edge of this immense challenge with his raw recruits, Joshua gets God's call: "Moses my servant is dead. Now get ready to cross into the land I am about to give you. I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses. No one will be able to stand against you. I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Josh. 1:2-5).

This promise to Joshua has inspired many Christian leaders (including myself). God has always done great things through leaders who believed his promises and courageously pursued them despite the difficulties and opposition.

Courage is necessary for Christian leadership because what God is calling you to do is always beyond your own abilities and will always be met with opposition. Discouragement is always a threat. There is no way that any sensible assessment would have given Joshua a chance of taking Canaan. And it's the same for you.

So Joshua courageously entered Canaan with God's words ringing in his ears, "*Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go*" (Josh. 1:9). And you know what happened!

Grab hold of that promise. You're going to need it.

4. Gideon and Obedience

I'm writing about some of the most effective biblical leaders and drawing out one characteristic that made their leadership great. In this post, we look at Gideon.

Gideon lived during the time of the Judges. This was the 300 year era between the Exodus from Egypt and the establishment of Israel as a nation under a king. Israel was a loose affiliation of tribal groups that struggled both spiritually (with the pagan religions of Canaan) and physically (with the pillaging raiders that would periodically sweep through their areas). It was a tough time.

When the tribes recognised their disobedience to God and confessed their need, God often raised up a charismatic "judge" to inspire and lead the nation. These men (and a woman) became both spiritual and militaristic leaders who, through God's power, temporarily freed the people of Israel from their oppression.

Gideon was very surprised when he got the call from God to save Israel (Judg. 6:14). He felt weak and incapable (Judg. 6:15) and leading the nation in battle was the last thing on his mind. He needed a lot of support and encouragement from God including quite a few reassuring miracles along the way (Judg. 6:21-22; 6:36-40; 7:9-14).

After destroying the Canaanite gods in his father's backyard (at night because he was afraid), he managed to muster 32,000 men to fight the huge Midianite horde. It didn't seem much of a force, but God kept whittling his "army" down until there were only 300 left.

So Gideon was left with 300 tribal fighters and a cunning but risky plan from God that basically relied on the Midianites getting a huge fright in the middle of the night and wiping themselves out. If this plan backfired, it would lead to his tiny platoon being quickly annihilated.

You wouldn't call Gideon courageous. Nor would you say that he was confident. He was rather reluctant to lead really. But he was obedient. When finally he was convinced that God wanted him to lead and that he definitely had God's plan, then he said to the remaining 300, "Get up! The Lord has given the Midianite camp into your hands" (Judg. 7:15). And the strategy worked perfectly, just as God had promised.

Some of us are raring to go as leaders. You can't hold us back. But others of us are more cautious. We don't feel particularly capable or charismatic. And we are surprised when we get an inkling that God may actually want us to lead. Well Gideon is an encouragement. Just listen to God and obediently do what he asks. And if you need a little more encouragement or reassurance than others, then that's fine by God. Just listen to God and do it.

5. David and Heart

I'm writing about some of the most effective biblical leaders and drawing out one characteristic that made their leadership great. In this post, we look at David.

This guy is my all-time favourite biblical leader (apart from Jesus of course). I often wonder why I identify with David more than anyone else. It's not that I've made a huge impact on a nation (like David) or have performed immense acts of courage. Nor have I murdered anyone, committed adultery or struggled with my children. In many ways David and I are poles apart.

It's got something to do with David's heart. When God was getting cold feet about Saul's leadership of Israel, he said that he would look for a man "after his own heart" (1 Sam. 13:14). He chose David.

Now I can't nail down exactly what it means to have a heart like God's. But from David's life, I think it's got something to do with passion to see God honoured, desire to please God, and willingness to give everything to following God.

I'm certainly pleased that it has nothing to do with perfection. Most of the biblical material on David describes his failures and problems. Personally, I'm glad that my failures are not on public display like David's. There is no attempt to paper over his flaws and turn him into some matchless leader. He made plenty of mistakes and suffered through the consequences. No, heart for God doesn't demand perfection (although David did know how to repent).

But under his brokenness was a beautiful heart that pumped for God. He gave everything he had and nothing would stop him. One day as a young teenager he arrived in the Israelite camp with sandwiches from daddy for his big brothers in the army. Hearing the taunts of the massive Philistine champion Goliath, and seeing the terrified Israelite soldiers, he made this offer: "Let no one lose heart on account of this Philistine; your servant will go and fight him... The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine" (1 Sam. 17:32, 37). Now that's God's heart!

God is still on the lookout for leaders with his heart - guys and girls who will deeply love him and passionately pursue his honour no matter what the cost. That kind of heart is unstoppable.

I hope that my heart is just a little like David's. And yours too.

6. Daniel and Prayer

I'm writing about some of the most effective biblical leaders and drawing out one characteristic that made their leadership great. In this post, we look at Daniel.

In terms of sphere of influence in their own time, Daniel was probably the greatest leader in the Bible. He not only had prominent roles in successive Babylonian regimes (Dan. 2-5), but also was a significant early player in the Persian empire that followed (Dan. 6).

Not bad for a refugee whose country was wiped out by the Babylonians. To make such an impact in cultures that were unfamiliar and pagan, Daniel must have had great leadership skills and standing. I mean rising to the top leadership in your own country is tough enough. But becoming the right-hand man to a foreign emperor (2:48) that ruled the known world would take incredible ability.

Daniel obviously worked hard and must have been greatly gifted (1:20), but I get the impression that it was Daniel's prayer life and intimate relationship with Yahweh that set him apart. For example, the author of

Daniel makes it clear that his outstanding abilities came directly from God (1:17) and that God gave him his insights (2:27-28).

When Daniel was being scrutinised for any imperfection or weakness that could be used to discredit him, it was his obvious prayer life (6:10-11) that stood out to his critics. The conspirators “went as a group and found Daniel praying and asking God for help.”

Half of the book of Daniel (chapters 7-12) is a record of what God said to him in dreams and visions. Here was a leader who was used to spending intimate time with God.

In some ways this is surprising. Daniel probably had a more challenging organisational job than any other biblical leader. You would think that he had little time to spend with God when he had so many pressures and demands. Yet we know that “three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God” (6:10). Daniel’s leadership was centred around prayer.

I have no desire to make you feel guilty. Few of us feel that we’re praying enough. But God has made himself incredibly available, and if we are to make a lasting spiritual impact, it’s likely that the wisdom and power will come from God through prayer.

You can push yourself hard (and I hope at times that you do), but ultimately the significant work will be done by God. So the more you are in touch with his plans and power, the more you will see happen through your life. It’s that simple.

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