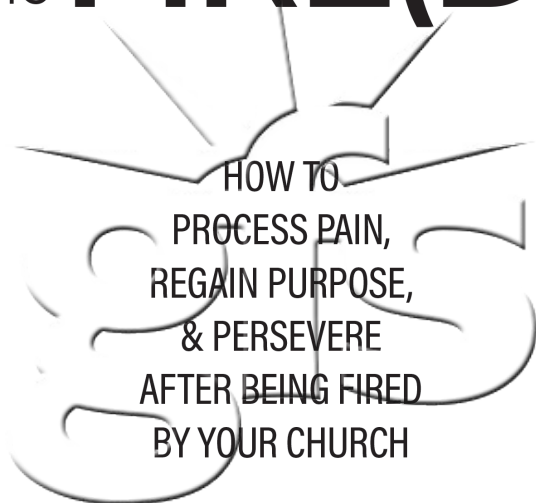


Refined By The Fire(d)

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HOW TO
PROCESS PAIN,
REGAIN PURPOSE,
& PERSEVERE
AFTER BEING FIRED
BY YOUR CHURCH

SAMPLE

KYLE ISABELLI



NEW YORK

LONDON • NASHVILLE • MELBOURNE • VANCOUVER

Refined By The Fire(d)

How to Process Pain, Regain Purpose, and Persevere After Being Fired by Your Church

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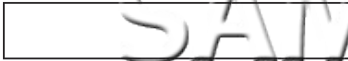
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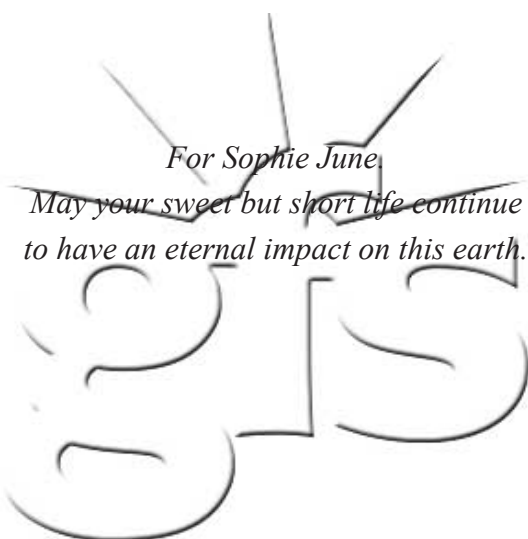


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*For Sophie June
May your sweet but short life continue
to have an eternal impact on this earth.*

SAMPLE

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PREFACE

I was a freshman in high school when the TV show *The Apprentice* first made its way into our homes in 2004. As a teen who wasn't yet old enough to have a job, it was comical to watch Donald Trump sit in his intense boardrooms and say, "You're fired!" I thought, *Is this really how things are like in real life?* Learning that "reality shows" are usually far from reality, I soon realized it was more of a game show.

Sitting here today, Fall 2021, I am shocked to find out there have been over seventy seasons of the show that now spans thirty-three countries. Three more countries—Brazil, Indonesia, and South Africa—are set to release a new season of their version of *The Apprentice* in the months ahead. Maybe the show is so wildly popular because the *reality of* being fired from a job is all too familiar to so many people.

The reality hit me in the Spring of 2017 as a twenty-eight-year-old husband and father of two kids under two. I was in my "dream job" as a pastor that worked primarily with high school students. It was in high school that Jesus changed my

life forever. I had a purpose and meaning for living that went beyond getting good grades, excelling in sports, and landing that academic or athletic scholarship to get into the college of my dreams. I wanted to be a youth pastor and work primarily with high school students so I could watch them be forever changed by a personal relationship with Jesus too.

For nearly two years, I worked in this position at my church until that one fateful day when my supervisor and another pastor in the church sat me down and said, “You’re not a good fit at this church.” I’m not sure which is worse: being told straight up that “you’re fired” or having it sugar-coated with nuanced phrases that make you feel like something is wrong with you. Suddenly, I faced a reality I wasn’t ready to face.

Trials are a part of life, but I never thought one of the biggest trials I would face would be getting fired from a church. I thought that only happened in big corporations—in the business world—or when you did something morally wrong or, perhaps worse, illegal. Not for being a bad fit! And fired from a church? I never thought the Church, the people Jesus gave up His life for, would be the starting point to the greatest *refined by fire* process in my life.

But as I have come to realize over the years, many pastors and other church staff find themselves in these circumstances too—just as the many others in jobs in every industry who are let go. And some of us have been fired in some difficult, surprising, and hurtful ways. The hardest thing for me was the idea that the Church is supposed to be a shelter in times of need, a place to find hope and healing when you have experienced an unfair tragedy. So where do you turn when you don’t find a shelter but a battlefield instead?

Google. Yep, that's right. I turned to Google, like any person does, to figure out what to do in my crisis. I typed:

How to deal with being fired from a church.

My church fired me. Now what?

When the church hurts you because they fired you.

When a pastor is fired.

To my surprise, there were no answers; the results were sparse, mostly non-existent. I found a couple of random blogs but nothing of substance that I could relate to my situation and what I was feeling. I made my search more generic, looking for anything about being fired, and all I found were blogs, subreddits, and advice from financial companies on how to collect unemployment.

I learned churches, and many non-profits, don't pay unemployment tax, which means if you're fired, you can't collect unemployment. Nothing was helpful for the internal carnage. It seemed everything was communicated in a five-step plan that I thought was unrealistic to achieve and didn't deal with the emotions I felt. Where were the resources that could help me process, grieve, be angry, ask hard questions of Jesus and my faith, *and* help me land on my feet because I had a family to take care of financially?

To be fair, I probably didn't stay in that Google search long enough because I found a couple of books written to help people who had recently been fired from a job, though they were usually jobs outside of the church.¹ One interesting find was *Moving*

¹ Wagner, Megan. 2017. *Fighting Fired with Fire: A Guide to Coping with Job Loss, Rising from the Ashes and Igniting a Career You Love*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

On: Surviving the Grief of Forced Termination by Deanna Harrison, written for pastors in 2016.² Deanna shares the story of her husband being forced to resign from his role as senior pastor after being at the church for several years. She is now the executive director of Pastors' Hope Network, founded in 2019, which focuses on providing hope and help for pastors and their families who have been fired and are now in transition. I would encourage you to check out her organization and see if it's an organization where you could receive the love and care you and your family need.

Just one book. I found one book. In a culture inundated with hundreds of thousands of books ranging across hundreds of topics, like nutrition, exercise routines, faith, politics, marriage, and sex, I wondered how there could be only one about how to recoup and recover from being fired from a church.

It was just over twenty-four hours after being fired, and I knew I had to put my emotions into words. I spilled my words in my journal and then onto a scribbled, tear-stained paper, then to a typed Word document. Through it all, Jesus helped me make sense of everything for myself and, as I wrote, possibly for others. The irony hit me. For someone who loathed writing any more than twenty pages for the undergraduate and graduate classes he took, shock exploded inside me. Because right away, I sensed Jesus calling me to write this book. The desire in me was so strong, not only to help myself process my pain and grief but also because I had a strong desire to help the next pastor, the next church staff member, the next fired employee have a

2 Harrison, Deanna. 2015. *Moving On*. Book's Mind.

life-giving resource at their disposal. I was ready to be *refined by the fire(d)*.

How This Book Will Help You

First, I want to help those who have or will have to endure the painful reality of being fired, forced to resign, or “mutually agree” to go their separate ways. Because my story unfolded in a church, my goal is to speak primarily to those who share that unfortunate experience. However, there will be many transferable principles you can apply to losing a job outside of the church. As I talk with people in the business world, they resonate with my experience and see how what I learned is helpful to them in their firing.

I want you to work through your brokenness and your pain. As you endure this trial, I hope you will be refined and made stronger in your faith and life, just as God designed.

Second, I want you to leave your church or job well. Most people who are fired do not feel like they should have been fired (a *majority* may even be an understatement). They feel mistreated, sometimes hurt, because someone in a leadership position may have acted horribly against them. Those feelings may be valid, and you may be right—that your boss got it wrong in firing you. But I believe what God wants more than anything else is for you to leave your position with so much grace and mercy that, to your supervisor, your leaders, and in my context, your church, it reflects the grace God shows each of us every day.

Third, I want all employers to read my story and think of how they can be even more gracious, kind, loving, and caring when

the tough decision comes to have to fire someone. This book is not about eliminating firings but about how we might become more gracious, empathetic, and clear in the steps leading up to the firing. This book should grow a desire within leadership to care more about their teams than what any individual can produce for their “bottom lines.” In the church, specifically, I hope church leaders might see their staff members as the primary people they should focus on in Jesus’s call to “make disciples,” instead of seeing them as a means to an end or positions to fill to lead a ministry at the church.

Finally, I want to help those in the church who have just lost a beloved church staff member to a firing. The dynamic between our relationship with God and our relationship with the Church can blur quickly when this happens to our pastors or ministry staff. We, too, need the space to grieve, mourn, and be reminded that the Church *is* the hope of the world, even when things feel a little hopeless. I pray that through reading my story and the countless nuggets of wisdom that were imparted to me by the far too many who had experienced being fired or seeing someone fired, we would all be *refined by the fire(d)*. Let’s enter “the fired” together as we process our pain, regain our purpose, and persevere through it all so that we come out stronger and more like Jesus on the other side.

INTRODUCTION

Metals are the most valuable commodity in our society. From the monetary worth of gold, silver, and bronze to the steel that holds up almost every tall building, to the brass and copper pipes that allow electricity and water to flow freely through your house, metal is found everywhere. Many kinds are underrated yet vitally important for our day-to-day living. I am thankful that metals go through an intense process of being refined by fire so they can hold immense weight and be a conduit of electricity. When metals go through the fire—hundreds, even thousands of degrees Fahrenheit of fire—their value increases.

In the Bible, the Apostle Peter writes about the Christian faith in this way. “So be truly glad. There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you must endure many trials for a little while. These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor

on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world” (1 Peter 1:6–7, NLT). When our lives are filled with trials, it will allow us to grow our faith, strengthen our character, and become more like Jesus. He endured the greatest trial; He was refined by the hottest of fires, bearing the sins of humanity and overcoming death once and for all for our good and His glory, honor, and praise. Trials are a guarantee in this life, and if you’re in a trial-by-fire(d) season, get ready to get stronger, just like Jesus, no matter how hot it gets.



THE INITIAL FIRING

On the morning of April 7, 2017, I received a text from my supervisor, asking me if I could have an “advanced meeting” with him and our lead pastor at the campus. An advanced meeting was typically a way for leaders to help staff members grow as productive members of the team and be even better contributors to the church as a whole. I was excited to not only have this scheduled with my supervisor, the executive pastor, but also with the lead campus pastor—the two guys that managed most of our staff.

What happened that afternoon, one week before Easter, ended up being a complete shock. The meeting started with my supervisor saying, “Kyle, over these last couple of months, as we have rolled out our church’s new vision and core values, we have had a couple of conversations about how you don’t necessarily see eye-to-eye on all the values. I know you’ve said you are willing to learn them and change, but I just don’t see that hap-

pening. We don't think this is working out as our church moves forward." I could feel my heart drop right through my stomach. Before we get into the details of the next forty-five minutes of this conversation, let me set some background context.

My Backstory

Almost two years before this meeting, I was hired by a different campus pastor and a different executive pastor of the church to lead the youth ministry. One month into my job, the campus pastor was no longer my supervisor. The executive pastor had been demoted, and a new executive pastor had been promoted. A year later, that new executive pastor was fired (with three other full-time staff quitting in the same month), and my next new supervisor was the long-standing worship pastor . . . now, executive pastor. That's right. In that meeting on April 7, I was sitting in front of my fourth boss in less than two years. Confused and exhausted yet? I sure was!

These changes came with a lot of new expectations, new relationships that had to be forged, and a new understanding I had to reach of what each changed value and priority in ministry had become. When new leaders emerge in any organization, there's a need for the remaining staff to catch their supervisor up about where things stand in the ministry and where things are going. Then there's the supervisor's job to communicate and implement their unique expectations and desires about where the ministry is going. If you have been on either side of this equation, you know this can take some time and be quite challenging. When you have repeated this process four times in a brief span, the challenge becomes . . . well, even more challenging.

The first six months working for my newest supervisor were great—from the beginning of the summer through the middle of the fall of 2016. There was a high level of trust afforded me; there were more church-wide responsibilities given to me on top of my youth ministry responsibilities; there were also some good things happening in the high school ministry. The senior pastor had even praised me in front of our staff because I had shared that through all the transitions the previous year, as well as the many transitions that took place in my first church ministry job, my goals were to remain positive, stay out of the gossip, and focus on what the Lord had for me as the youth pastor.

Toward the end of October, my wife gave birth to our second child. I took two weeks off to be home, and then I came back excited about what was next as we learned how to balance life with two kids under two and my job leading the youth ministry.

During the next couple of months, my supervisor and I began to stray from seeing eye-to-eye on defining “wins” or successes for the high school ministry. Certain events or outreaches that I thought went well were deemed unsuccessful, or at least described as not the way the pastor would have executed the programs. He wanted high numbers of students coming to our church building for a big, energetic event. I programmed events off-site, with a focus on developing relationships between students and between students and their leaders. Neither of us neglected the primary purpose of helping students to know and follow Jesus; we just didn’t agree on what that primary strategy should be for these outreach events. It was through this process that my supervisor and I had our first real conversation to clear the air.

It was the day before Christmas Eve. I reminded him I had asked for feedback and mentoring, but I never got it and didn't trust him enough yet to provide it, since he had never shown up to any of my youth group nights to evaluate me. He agreed he needed to show up so that his feedback would be valid, instead of just giving his thoughts after the fact. We also talked about how our ideas of what a win was for high school ministry looked different, and we now needed to clarify what wins were moving forward. I was encouraged by this initial conversation. As I look back, however, maybe I should've pursued the clarity conversation again after the first of the year instead of waiting for him to initiate it. It seemed to have fallen through the cracks.

January came and went with a heavy focus on our high school winter retreat, one that ultimately became a huge win for me, as well as for my supervisor. But I now realize it was a win for different reasons, and the disparity once again showed itself in the annual High School Super Bowl Party the following weekend. For some reason, a super bowl party is one of the most hotly debated events in youth ministry. I've never had a preference—for it or against it—mainly because I always enjoyed the time to connect with students and leaders. After a fun and exhausting winter retreat, I looked forward to that next weekend when a family from our church had offered to cook for and host sixty-plus high schoolers in their home! It was the perfect opportunity to connect with the students again, following up with everyone about what they experienced at the winter retreat. The party went well, or so I thought.

The following Tuesday, our staff went through a full-day training with a church consulting group. This group analyzed

data from a test they administered to determine the characteristics of the “Top 400” leaders in the world (from the military, government, ministry, sports, business, and other industries). The way individual reports were generated was by having five to six people, including yourself, look through a list of three hundred words. If you or another person thinks a word describes you, you put a checkmark next to it. Then the group uses their computer wizards to pump out the data from this test. It was all very fascinating and pretty accurate.

On top of all of this, our senior pastor shared how we were trying to refine our staff culture and get everyone aligned with a common vision. With so many transitions over the previous year, he felt it was important to ensure the staff knew who we were as a church so that, as we moved into the summer, we could strategically plan ahead and “hit the ground running” in the fall. I was excited because not only would I gain a greater understanding of how I could be a better leader, but I also assumed there would be greater clarity moving forward about what our church was looking to do. I felt like I could finally align my expectations with my supervisor’s about what a win was for the ministry I served.

After this training day, my supervisor and I sat down and looked over the results. We talked about the things I learned and the ways I could grow. That was all helpful, and I was encouraged by it all, but then the conversation shifted. My supervisor explained to me that he had figured out why some of our discussions over the past few months about the events I’d done with the youth group bothered him so much. He told me how disappointed he was to find out we did not have the

Super Bowl party at the church. This was a surprise to me since the two of us, along with the junior high pastor, had talked about this party back in November, *and* he had seen and approved my calendar of events for the winter and spring seasons before Christmas, which included the party's location at the family's home.

He believed, "We are a church that gathers in our place." We have a building; we have a space; we meet consistently every weekend at the same time in the same place, and when we throw the big event, the big party, we bring people "in" that way. That was our church's way! (This was pre-covid.) It seemed to me we were too focused on getting people to show up for church instead of *being* the Church.

But aha! The light bulb went off in my head! It made sense why he'd grown frustrated with me over what seemed like small decisions, even though there'd also been decisions where he had allowed me to make the final call.

At the end of this meeting, he asked me if I was willing to learn how to lead the ministry the "church's way." He further explained how my way of leading ministry differed from the church's, but that we all needed to align our strategies to be on the same page. I nodded my head and shared that I wanted to get clarity on what he was concerned about because, at the end of the day, I know we are all pursuing one primary goal for our church youth ministry: making disciples of students, helping students know Jesus, and following Him.

I was ready to listen. I left that meeting in February feeling hopeful because I'd finally heard some specific direction from my supervisor. Mainly, hold events at the church!

That same month, my supervisor had also asked me to talk with some families in the church whose high school student wasn't attending our youth group gatherings consistently. Though new students and more students were coming to the youth group that year, there were some families with high school students who did not want to get plugged in yet. While talking with these parents, my supervisor wanted me to set up a meeting with all the parents to discuss their ideas together so we could be better learners of how to care for their students. I pursued these conversations with six families. Every one of them appreciated me coming to them and shared their perspectives about their students and our ministry—all of which had to do with their child not connecting with other students or a small group leader. However, none of them had any desire to meet with my supervisor and me in that type of large-group setting with other families. They told me they would feel awkward having a meeting with other parents about something so personal and unique to their child. I reported all of this to the pastor, yet he still wanted me to schedule a meeting with at least a couple of families.

Finally, I got one set of parents to agree to such a meeting, and it was in this meeting that I shared the vision and mission of our ministry with these parents. They were on board with it. We talked, and I felt both sides were heard, and it seemed like practical steps were put in place to help this couple's daughter get more connected. The pastor ended the meeting by thanking them for their time and saying, "There won't be any drastic changes made to the youth group, but we just want to hear from you and learn from you." This meeting took place five days before I was fired from my position.

April 7: Back to the Initial Firing

I was not the right fit for our church’s youth ministry. My supervisor affirmed my gifts as a youth pastor, leader, teacher, and shepherd, as well as my love and care for students, leaders, and families. But ultimately, he believed I would thrive in a different environment—not his, not this church.

After a few minutes, I spoke up for the first time. “I don’t feel like you have given me a chance to learn our church’s way of doing things. You’ve only recently clarified this for me. We have been going through these things for only two months, and the action items you have told me to do, I have done. In my opinion, two months is too short of a time to evaluate any changes.”

In his mind, it had been longer than two months. Even though I had been waiting longer, he had only provided some clarity in February. He believed I’d had plenty of opportunities to change. He had a manila folder filled with examples that “proved” how it was not going to work out, and how ultimately, “I was not teachable . . . unwilling to collaborate with him.” He brought up some of the previously mentioned events and how I should’ve listened to his initial feedback on doing something big at the church. I pushed back, explaining that if there was something he wanted to be done his way, a non-negotiable, he should have mandated it. He should not have given me the option to make the final decision or conduct meetings where the other people in the room agreed with me and then trusted me with the decision. His argument: “We are a church that leads by influence, not mandate.” In my mind, in a season of new visioning and aligning staff, there needed to be mandating, not merely suggestions, especially if our jobs depended on whether our “choices” matched the super-

visors' opinions. I reiterated that it seemed to me like those were healthy discussions, and at the end of the day, many times over, he still saw “wins” with doing things “my way,” even if it wasn't the method he was expecting.

He immediately changed direction and told me I didn't willingly collaborate with him as the other staff did. “Out of all the staff I oversee, you are the one who stops by my office the least to ask me questions.”

I explained that every week before I plan out the program for the youth group, I go over the feedback he gave me from the first—and only time—he came to the youth group to evaluate it, at the beginning of January. I showed him how I had implemented his feedback and reminded him of conversations we'd had about how I was doing this consistently.

He then said I wasn't implementing the “big event” nights focused on tons of fun and games with a five-minute message at the end. Our junior high pastor was using them monthly and had garnered a large attendance at his youth group nights.

I reminded him of the two events I held the previous semester and the many more I had planned for the fall and spring of the next year.

He then said he had to force me to do them and that I was unwilling to listen to his suggestions about them. I told him that my only pushback had been that I didn't think it was beneficial to do them once a month but twice a semester for high school students.

As you can see, the conversation was going nowhere. I saw it too . . . and so did the other pastor in the room. So the campus pastor interjected and said, “Do you really want to be in a place

where you have to be told the things you need to do?” I told him that for a season, this season, I was willing to learn. I was willing to be stretched out of my comfort zone and adjust because I knew God could grow me and use this time to make me a better leader and pastor. I did not want to be in a place where this was happening all the time, true, but I thought I would be okay for a season.

My supervisor jumped in and told me he couldn't prod me along anymore. He said, “This isn't the place where we can push people along; they need to be on board and moving forward together.” He reiterated he had been pushing me along for over six months. It was when he said that I knew there was no use saying another word to save my job. So I asked when they wanted me to be done.

I had less than two months. June 1 would be my last day. I would get through Easter, finish the ministry year (four more nights of youth group), and then have a couple more weeks in the office to wrap up and transition myself out of the church. They would give me one month of severance and have me use my vacation time for the last two weeks of May to get me to July 1 with the severance. (Remember, there was no unemployment, so time was ticking). The conversation ended with my supervisor reiterating that the church and its youth ministry were just not the right fit for me, but that I was a good youth pastor and could thrive in a different church environment. The campus pastor ended our time by praying for me, and I left. I got in my car, with tears filling my eyes and a cloud of shame hovering over my head, feeling like the biggest failure ever.

I pulled into my driveway and saw my two-year-old daughter and my father-in-law in our front yard. My daughter had the

biggest smile on her face because this was the first time she was still outside when I pulled in from work. It was like a whole new experience for her, to get to see her daddy step out of his car and run up to him and give him a big hug. She was usually inside, waiting for the garage door to open, which signified Daddy's return home. As she was experiencing something for the first time, I prayed right then that as I experienced being fired for the first time, I could find joy like the joy I saw on her face. I held back tears (having dark sunglasses helped), picked up my daughter, and gave her a big hug and kiss. I greeted my father-in-law, went inside, and went into "Dad" mode.

The Wilderness

My wife, Maria, was in a season where she was experiencing intense back and pelvis pain. Under her doctor's orders, she could not lift more than five pounds. She was not driving—even being in a car caused her discomfort—but she had to get to physical therapy, the chiropractor, and to therapeutic massages. There were five or six appointments every week. So there needed to be someone at our house with her 24/7, including when I wasn't there, to help out with our daughter and five-month-old son. When I was home, I was taking care of two kids and my wife.

When I walked inside, I got my son into his car seat, packed up the car, and the three of us headed to one of her many appointments that week while my daughter stayed at the house with Grandma and Grandpa.

"How was your day, babe?"

I was dreading hearing those words from my wife on our thirty-minute ride to the chiropractor. To my surprise, I didn't

cry immediately when I told her I was fired. However, tears flowed from her eyes. And it didn't take long for the liquid pain to fall from my eyes once I reiterated the conversation I had at work.

“How can this be? . . . This is so unfair. You're not a bad youth pastor; you're a great youth pastor.” My wife was going from shock to anger, to selflessly loving and encouraging me, all in a span of seconds. I recounted more and more details, then dropped her off for her appointment. Parents of infants and toddlers know the car is your best friend when trying to keep a sleeping child asleep. For her hour-plus appointment, my son and I drove around town, and by God's grace, he slept the entire time, even on the car ride home! This drive gave me a lot of time to think, to cry, to pray, and even to talk to another youth pastor in the area who was mentoring me that year.

My mind raced with questions: How would I tell my students? My leaders? My co-workers? My family? My daughter's second birthday party was the next day . . . how was that supposed to go? What should I do next? Do I look for a youth pastor job somewhere in the area? Do I look to become more of a lead pastor? Do we move somewhere else? Do I stop doing ministry? For a season? *Forever*? Do I just get a “normal” job? Do I need to re-format my resume? Do I need to have two different resumes, one for church jobs and one for “normal” jobs? How would I ever get a job in ministry again if I was fired? Do I go back to school and get my doctorate so I can teach? (That last thought came and went faster than free pizza at youth group). How can I afford a house payment on a home we've lived in for less than a year? Do we get our house ready to sell? Will I join

the millions³ of millennials who have to live in their parents' basements? Will I go bankrupt?

My mind was *all* over the place.

On the way home, my wife calmed my heart and mind a bit, reminding me of the season our family was in: “The Wilderness.” As I mentioned before, my wife was having serious back and pelvic issues. It all started with a terrible epidural experience during the birth of our daughter, where they “missed” when sticking the needle into her back. Then the head anesthesiologist came in forty-five minutes later, and on her first try, did it correctly. This experience started my wife on a trajectory of muscle tension and pain that eventually landed us where we were.

Almost two years later, and after a successful natural delivery five months earlier, my wife was finally gaining more strength in her back. It seemed like the end was in sight, and her second labor and delivery seemed to be the natural reset her body needed. She was feeling better but still needed consistent chiropractic care.

At the end of February 2017, about six weeks before my firing, something happened that put Maria in more pain than she had ever been in before. Somehow, her pelvis went out of alignment, causing an incredible amount of physical pain, which significantly affected her function (yes, it hurts as bad as it sounds). So we were in the heat of this crazy season of constant appointments, with zero margin, running on empty, and wondering why she was experiencing this terrible pain every moment of her life. Throughout this season, the women’s group at our church was

3 My overly dramatic estimate.

going through a Priscilla Shirer Bible study on the Israelites as they trekked through the wilderness. The study was called “One in a Million.”⁴

One main idea we took from this was how God had led the Israelites through the wilderness when there was a much quicker way to get to the Promise Land from Egypt. Yes, the long road was brought on because of their sin, but God had a specific purpose for leading the Israelites the way He did. And for our family, our anthem was that we were learning to become even more dependent on God on our wilderness journey. We were confident God would completely heal my wife, but He was purposefully leading us through this season of long-suffering.

While talking about getting fired, Maria came to believe it was another aspect of our wilderness journey. God was going to do a work in our lives through this difficult process. And time and time again, we reminded each other of this: that instead of praying only for God to heal and remove this hardship from our lives, we needed to lean in toward God and His presence, not running away from how we feel but processing the pain in our hearts and lives. We need to seek Him even more during this trial because He was obviously working out something in our lives. We didn’t want to miss out on how He might be making us more like Jesus.

Some Bible verses popped into my head as Maria encouraged me. “When troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your

4 “One In A Million Bible Study | Priscilla Shirer | Lifeway.” n.d. www.lifeway.com/en/product-family/one-in-a-million.

faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing” (James 1:2–4, NLT). I wanted to go *Frozen* on it and “let it go,” but the Lord had a greater purpose for it, to let it *grow* so we could endure and be made perfect and complete.

I imagine that as James, the half-brother of Jesus, was writing this to the new Christians who had scattered from Jerusalem because of the intense religious persecution, he was thinking, “Twelve tribes—new Christians—this is James speaking: I know we are afraid and scattered right now after Stephen’s brutal murder at the hands of the Jewish religious leaders; I know we are missing the comforts of being together in Jerusalem and hearing Peter preach to us the ‘rich food’ from the Old Testament that points to Jesus; I know the threat of the Roman Empire and the Jewish leaders, namely the Pharisees, is scary; but I urge you, stay in it! God is working, and He will be faithful and make us more like Jesus. So find all of this to be a great joy because God is making us more like Jesus!”

So I prayed:

OK, Jesus, I’m leaning in. I am going through this, and I am expecting that as we journey through the wilderness, you will make me more like You. And if I am truly sold out with devoting my life to sharing my hope in You with those around me, I better be able to stick with it through the wilderness. No more just teaching from James 1. It’s time to put my money where my mouth is and persevere.

Little did I know this would be one of the hardest, most difficult decisions I would make in my life as a follower of Jesus. But this was not something I had to deal with on my own. Yes, my wife and family were going to be there, but I had to be proactive in this process and seek help right away. I knew someone specific who could understand my situation and help me process things right away: my youth pastor.

About eight years before that fateful day, April 7, 2017, my youth pastor, mentor, and role model had taken a position at a church in California as a high school pastor. He'd packed up his family from the Midwest and headed west. Fifty-three days later, he was told to pack up his books, clear out his office, and leave the church. No forty-five-minute conversation. No exit interview. He just had to leave. He re-packed his family and drove the U-Haul back to the Midwest.

After bouncing around in a couple of different jobs, he had secured a great position as a pastor and had been in the role for a few years. I texted him that night, and we talked for over an hour the next day. Honestly, he did a lot more listening than talking. I wanted to soak in his wisdom like I had been doing since I was fifteen years old (I was now twenty-eight). I knew his experience was “worse” than mine and that he had worked through so much of the hurt already. I was hoping to get the million-dollar answers, but he just kept asking me questions.

After telling him the details of the story, he asked me different things like, “What are *your* blind spots? What are the truths *you* can take away from what your supervisor said about *you*? What does this reveal about *your* heart for ministry and for

Jesus? How can *you* show grace and love because love covers a multitude of sins? How can *you* leave well?"

I wasn't ready for this conversation. I didn't want to hear about all these things *I* needed to do; I just wanted someone who would let me vent, tell me I was right, confirm for me that my supervisor was wrong, and say everything would be just fine in the end. He did share for about ten minutes at the end of our conversation and reaffirmed this Scripture for me: "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28, NLT). He was less concerned about my firing while still being empathetic and compassionate toward me. He was more concerned about me being more like Jesus and treating everyone, especially my supervisor, like Jesus would: full of grace and forgiveness. The last thing he asked me to do was to journal; journal everything. Journal answers to the questions he was asking me. Journal what God was teaching me through his Word. Journal my conversations with my wife and with others. Journal as much as possible during this time because when you get pen to paper, it allows you to fully lean into what God wants you to hear.

And journal I did. In fact, journaling through that process is what created the passion in me to write this book and helped me remember and articulate my experiences and emotions accurately.

The Commonality

I don't know the statistics of pastors who are fired or forced to resign from their jobs for reasons not associated with moral failures or illegal activity, but I know it's a lot . . . too much. The US

Bureau of Labor Statistics produces a monthly report of hiring, firings, and unemployment rates. For the last six months of 2022, well over one million people were laid off or fired per month.⁵ A 2012 study published in the Review of Religious Research found that about one in three pastors have or will face a forced termination in their ministry careers.⁶

I don't know the percentage of people who are fired for reasons that are not illegal or immoral, but my guess is most of those people believed they were in their dream job one day, and by the end of that same day, they were not. There is something clearly wrong, but instead of pointing fingers at the system, the individual leaders, or the employees, let's first start with ourselves.

We are a bunch of broken people, trying to work for and lead other broken people. In the church world, we are a bunch of broken pastors, trying to lead broken people to know Jesus and make Him known in our world. Yet, it is in this brokenness that God wants us to stay and persevere because it is in this brokenness that God can grow us exactly how He wants to grow us. It reminds me of the prophet Isaiah and his prophetic word about the Father's plan for His Son, Jesus: "But it was the Lord's good plan to crush him and cause him grief" (Isaiah 53:10, NLT).

Yes, this verse is all about God's plan of saving the world through Jesus's death and resurrection, but I couldn't help but resonate with this verse as I first thought about my firing. I think there is something to reflecting on how God was most glori-

5 "Economic News Release: Job Openings and Labor Turnover Summary." U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics, Feb 1, 2023. www.bls.gov/news.release/jolts.nr0.htm

6 "Forced Termination on American Clergy: Its Effects and Connection to Negative Well-Being." Marcus Tanner, Anisa Zvonkovic, and Charlie Adams. March 2012.

fied in His Son's obedience to the suffering He experienced on the cross. It was a part of God's good plan for our salvation. In Jesus's greatest pain and hardest trial, He and the Father were most glorified. This led me to believe that God was not surprised by my firing, even allowed my firing, and had specific ways He wanted to grow, refine, and make me more like Jesus through this particular trial. But I had to lean into processing, persevering, and regaining my purpose to see the good in His plan.

In Jesus's greatest pain and hardest trial, He and the Father were most glorified.

I wholeheartedly believe the same is true for you! In the chapters ahead, as I further unfold my story, you will see the ideas of processing pain, regaining purpose, and persevering woven throughout the pages of my story. It is important that you commit today to use this threefold lens to view your firing as you step into your refined by the fire(d) season. If you're there right now or need to reflect on that time in your life when you experienced a firing, the first step I would encourage you to do is to begin journaling or taking notes—today! Use the framework of processing pain, regaining purpose, and persevering to guide your writing. What does this look like?

Processing Pain

As a follower of Jesus, I started by journaling what I learned from the Bible and hearing from God in prayer. For the readers who share my Christian faith, that is where you begin: journal what you sense Jesus is revealing to you through His Word and in prayer. If you're not comfortable reading the Bible or praying

because you share a different faith, I would still encourage you to reflect on some of the Bible verses or prayers I include, ones you will see scattered throughout this book. As I shared earlier, there is something about the humble life of Jesus that is so relevant to being fired from a job. He understands pain and suffering on a different level, one that can help us on our worst days.

After that, journal about your conversations with co-workers, family members, friends, and even your interactions with your leader. Not only should you do this for your emotional and mental sanity, but also because I truly believe this will help reveal what God is trying to teach you in your firing, in your wilderness season.

The Promise Land seems very, very far away at this point, but don't worry; there are four books of the Bible that cover forty years of the Israelites' journey through the wilderness. So get ready to write and be thankful you aren't carving it into stone tablets like Moses. We will get into some of the most self-revealing times in my life, times when God really challenged and changed my heart to give me a new heart for Him and for others. And my prayer is that as you read this book and do your own journaling, He will do the same for you.

Regain Purpose

We live in a culture where our job ends up being one of the main ways we find identity, purpose, and meaning. Think back to the last conversation you had with someone you were meeting for the first time. What are those first couple of questions you asked or were asked: your name, maybe where you live, and at some point, "What do you do?" Work is a good thing. It's

something God created in the beginning, and it is something we will do in eternity, but it's not our identity. Unfortunately, our jobs have become our identities; even our kids are taught from a very young age that school is about the progression of getting an education that will get them into the college that will help them answer the question, "What do you want to do when you grow up?" In the church world, I am most often introduced as "Pastor Kyle." Doctors understand this phenomenon too—how your job redefines your name, your identity, and your purpose in life.

Let me be clear: *your job is not your identity; it is not your purpose in life. You have a greater purpose in life than what you do from nine to five (or any other shift of work)!* From my Christian perspective, it's about living a life as a child of God and pointing people to the new life Jesus has for them. No matter your religious beliefs, losing your job helps you see that you still exist as a human. You have an identity and purpose outside of your career. So as you process the immense pain of losing your job, you will begin to see across the pages of your journal your thoughts and feelings, which will help you regain your purpose in life, and it is not, nor has ever been, dependent on your job.

Persevere

This work is hard. Some days, it's even harder than being fired in the first place. While you process the pain of being fired, it may bring up past hurts, wounds, and unhealthy patterns of thinking (e.g., your job is your identity). These are thoughts and emotions—maybe lies—you need to feel, work through, and grow from in the future. You may realize that your firing from ten years ago or going through multiple firings or seeing someone

else getting fired brings up feelings and emotions you haven't dealt with yet. It is easy to give up on the process and push away the feelings, bury them, and try to move on as quickly as possible. I think we can all agree that is not a strategy for growth. This is true whether you are at the beginning of a firing or experienced a firing years ago. You will carry these pains, identity issues, and anything else with you into your next job, next church, next pastorate, and next relationship. It is better to do the work now so that when those thoughts or feelings arise later, you have already done the hard work to persevere and handle them in an emotionally and spiritually healthy manner. As you will see in my story, the pain and identity issues still come up, but I can consistently go back to the work I did early on in the process to help me move forward when the grief, sorrow, or struggles show up in the forefront of my mind. Stay the course, or, if the firing happened a while ago, jump back in and do the hard work now. It will be worth it in the end.

Ready to begin? Let's move on together in the refined by fire(d) process.

SAMPLE

PROCESSING THE PAINFUL REALITY OF PRIDE

When I left that meeting on Friday, I was told I did not have to be at church on Sunday morning. However, I still had to lead the youth group gathering that Sunday night without mentioning this to anyone within the church.

Saturday was the day of my daughter's second birthday party. This was also the day I had my first conversation with my youth pastor who gave me the advice to journal and look at how God wanted to work inside me instead of being angry and sad about my external circumstances. Don't worry, I will come back to the anger and sadness in upcoming chapters. I will also get back to the interactions I had with family at the birthday party and the students and leaders at youth group in the next chapter, but I first want to share what happened on Sunday afternoon before youth group. The first part happened while I

was at home journaling; the second, while I was at church preparing for youth group.

I began the journaling process by replaying the conversation I had on Friday to see if I could identify any of my blind spots. It felt nearly impossible to do because I was still angry, and I still didn't agree with anything my supervisor had said. So I prayed, and specifically, I was led to pray to help prepare my heart and mind for youth group. I knew the night would be difficult since I couldn't share with anyone what had happened, but that was the only prayer that came to mind. No prayers about my blind spots, no revelation about how I was wrong and he was right . . . nothing. I read some Scripture . . . nothing. I was confused by the silence, but I kept asking God for something (anything!). All I heard was "Prepare for tonight." That was it.

On Sunday nights, I am the only staff member in the church building. Our church building is a renovated, four-story office building with our student space on the third floor and all of our administrative offices on the fourth floor. On the fourth floor, there is a big room where our printer sits. From that room, you can see the majority of the staff offices, including my supervisor's office. On that particular Sunday, his office door was wide open. From my vantage point, I also noted the manila folder he had held in his hand forty-eight hours earlier, the one with his notes of the reasons he fired me. He had said he did not want to go through any of the notes, though we had covered a few. At that moment, I knew I wanted to cover them all. I knew that if I was going to fully heal, learn, and grow, I had to see it all, hear it all, or, in this case, read it all. So I walked into his office, took

the three pages from inside the folder, made a copy of them, and put the notes back in his folder. No one would ever know but Jesus and me . . .

You may be thinking, “This is what God was telling you to prepare for, a heist of confidential information, to be the Christian version of Jason Bourne!” I don’t think so, even though I wish I could be Jason Bourne. I shouldn’t have grabbed the notes, and I probably did violate some level of trust. As I reflect on it, knowing what I know now, I didn’t need those notes on that night. However, they led me to have an honest conversation with God, which allowed me to process my pain.

At first, I had to fight the feeling of being so mad these things were on paper, so mad these things were never shared with me in this detail, and ultimately, so mad these small things (in my perspective) were why I had been fired. But the Lord used the notes to bring healing and freedom to my heart and soul.

I read through them once before youth group but had to put them down so I wouldn’t dwell on them and ruin my attitude for the rest of the night.

I should clarify something: I do not encourage taking notes from your supervisor . . . or taking anything that is not yours. I am not one that lives by the mantra, “Don’t get permission first but ask for forgiveness later.” I acted as a complete hypocrite in that moment of weakness.

While you can clearly discern the sin of hypocrisy in my heart, let’s look at the blind spots I had as well. In my supervisor’s notes, there were three main ideas I took away after spending most of my Sunday night and into Monday reading, praying, and reflecting on the stolen information.

1. There was a lack of willingness on my part to collaborate with my supervising pastor.

I really struggled with this concept because, for the longest time, I had perceived myself, and thought others had perceived me, as a “learner.” I was never the kind of person who thought he knew everything or had the mindset of “my way or the highway.” Yet, I began to see why my supervisor felt this way. When I was first hired, the junior high pastor and I were given the “keys to the car” of the student ministry and told to drive! The quotation marks came from our three previous supervisors; this was even a part of their “pitch” to us during our interview process. But now, with my fourth supervisor, we seemed to be back in Driver’s Ed.

Was it fair? It doesn’t matter because that was my reality, and I didn’t realize this until after I was fired. When my supervisor gave me suggestions, more times than not, I just explained why I was still going to do it my way. Those instances I shared in the previous chapter were the ones listed in his notes. Even now, as I write this, I still think my ideas were better (but no, I don’t struggle with the “my way or the highway mindset” . . . or maybe I do!). Even if I am a truly collaborative person, he perceived me differently based on our interactions. I needed to be more willing to listen, ask clarifying questions, and sometimes just do what my supervisor asked me to do.

Another thing I realized is that the things my supervisor listed were not “make or break” issues for me for leading student ministry. They would still have been hard to implement because, from my perspective, I was being told how to drive the car of student ministry by someone who had little experience in leading student ministries. In church ministry, worship ministry, and

leading staff, my supervising pastor was absolutely qualified—and extremely gifted. But with student ministry? Not so much. Admittedly, it’s hard being told how to drive by someone who has little knowledge of driving when you’ve been driving for ten years as the “paid expert.” But does my experience, blurred by my arrogance, give me the right to dismiss everything? Absolutely not, and I should have realized that in these small matters, I could have conceded instead of giving every reason why my way was best for the ministry.

In the end, was I willing to collaborate? Not as much as I thought I was. I partnered or acquiesced in the things where I thought my supervisor was the expert, like planning and programming a service. He had been a worship pastor for ten years, so planning out the flow of teaching, music, transitions, announcements, and creative elements was his world. And in these instances, I did listen, took notes, and implemented his suggestions willingly. But in the areas I thought he was not the expert, I went with not only what I thought, but with what other youth ministry experts were saying and doing. I used their philosophies against my supervisor too. Was this right? Yes, and no.

There were times when I thought his lack of youth ministry experience showed, but in other areas, even if I disagreed, I should have gone with his suggestions at the beginning of our working relationship to build trust and lay a foundation of mutual respect.

One of my supervisor’s issues with me was that I would only do what he asked if I was “forced” to do it. I know I thought I was in a season where he needed to be crystal clear

on things so I would do things the church's way, but it revealed that my default was still to trust myself and my experience over taking suggestions from those in authority over me. Once again, most people who know me would not say I carry a huge "badge of pride" in my approach to ministry, but even a small dose of pride needs to be stomped out and destroyed. That was what the Lord was showing me. Even a hint of pride needs to be weeded out for us to be like Jesus. Maybe if Jesus would've continued his analogy of cutting off limbs when dealing with lust in Matthew 5, he would've said something like ". . . even if there is a hint of pride in your brain, it is like being the most arrogant dictator in the world. So cut off the part of your brain that houses pride because it is better to have half a brain than a full brain with pride hiding inside it." Even if Jesus didn't say that in the Sermon on the Mount, He was saying this to me through His Spirit. My pride needed to be put to death. It hurt to see that kind of arrogance in me, but it was there. And the Lord was doing his refining work in me to make me more like Jesus, the humble servant.

Even if there is a hint of pride in your brain, it is like being the most arrogant dictator in the world. So cut off the part of your brain that houses pride because it is better to have half a brain than a full brain with pride hiding inside it.

Practical Steps for Collaboration

From this revelation, I began to build a better framework for collaborating with those around me." First, I learned I can go the

extra mile by asking clarifying questions to see how strong the suggestion or passionate the idea is that I receive from anyone. Not just from a supervisor, but also from volunteers, internal or external leaders, co-workers, and others. One way I've heard a pastor share this concept is by asking, "Is this a soft opinion [suggestion] or a hard opinion [command]?"

Second, I can ask the "why" question again, before sharing my "expert" opinion on why I think I am right and my way is best. I can hear the person's heart through their answer, the reason they feel strongly or maybe not so strongly about any aspect of my job or the organization before sharing my perspective, explaining why I believe my way is the better option or why I don't fully agree with them.

Third, I can validate what they say by repeating their general idea and seeing some aspect of their idea as positive, even if in my heart, I still disagree with the big picture.

Finally, I can be clear that I haven't made a final decision and want to revisit the two sides soon, before finalizing anything. Even if the decision needs to be made that day, I can give myself and the other person some time—even if just an hour—to step away from it (and the emotion) before coming back and finalizing the decision.

I think of James, the half-brother of Jesus. If he was writing a manual on conflict resolution in the workplace, he would likely footnote his words from his epistle that read, "Be quick to listen and slow to speak" (James 1:19, NIV). I realized I needed to apply this directive when receiving a suggestion too. I never want to be the guy who is not a team player. I prided myself in being called a great team player throughout my life to this point,

but if one person doesn't see this in me, then I need to humble myself and through the power of the Spirit, work on collaborating willingly with my team, my leaders, my supervisors, and anyone else in ministry.

Do you see that in yourself as well? Maybe pride, even if it lives in the tiniest amount in your heart or brain, will be one of the first and primary things that will go through the refining fire(d).

2. My “philosophy of ministry” didn’t fully align with the church’s.

This one was not necessarily news to me since we had this discussion two months before I was fired, but I had missed the significance of our difference in opinions. One thing he wrote in his notes is that I told him “I got it” or “I understand,” but I really didn't get it. I didn't understand what he wanted me to do. Part of the reason for this was that he was unclear about his expectations, and part of it was that I didn't go the additional mile to understand. Therefore, he was right: at times, I didn't get it.

My focus on ministry was to build relationships with the core leaders and students to equip them to be on mission—not only in youth group but also in their communities, schools, and homes. My supervisor wanted my primary focus to be on drawing students *in* to our youth group so that my core team could carry out the work of the ministry. They seem similar, except I didn't place as high a value on the programming or big outreach events that brought students in like my supervisor did. That was a low value for me because the most important thing, in my mind, was building the team to be on mission, *out* in the world.

He was not against the mission, but he didn't want that to be my main focus since the best way to reach those lost students, in his opinion, was to draw them in with an attractive program. Once again, I don't think either of us would disagree about the importance of a solid youth ministry night and the focus on discipleship that leads to being on mission, but the disagreement came on what should a youth pastor spend their primary time on throughout the week. Neither of us was anti-big events or anti-small groups or pro-individual mentoring, but a youth pastor's primary focus was the sticking point—the place we didn't see eye to eye. And I missed it. I didn't understand that this was a big difference from the way the church wanted to operate and what the church wanted from its ministry.

Now, whether I agree (or you agree) with the strategy difference, what I needed to realize, once again, was how to ask the extra questions to ensure I was in alignment with my supervisor. My vision was to create an environment where small groups were the most important part of the youth group night, and he wanted the most important thing to be a compelling large-scale event with a great flow of teaching, music, and fun games. I finally understood this *after* I was fired.

Practical Steps for Aligning Philosophies

So what can I, or you, do in the future? One thought would be to have these conversations about philosophies of ministry before stepping into the next ministry position. I definitely missed these differences when I was hired and even in my first year of work. Granted, with three different supervisors before this one—I could have been and most likely was—on the same page with those previous supervisors.

In this firing process, someone told me, “Church leaders can’t necessarily tell you what they want, but they are really good at telling you what they don’t want.” It’s like when I ask my wife where she wants to go for dinner. I have to give a few suggestions that get denied before we reach her choice of where she wants to eat.

So how do you and I take this approach when working with a supervisor or group of church leaders? The answer is to have a few different ideas to bring to the table and *expect* that all will be critiqued and some will be shot down. Don’t give options to the question, “What do you value the most for the youth ministry?” Instead, frame it in this way (this applies to youth ministry): “I want to do a big event once a month where I only share the Gospel and play a ton of fun games. What do you think about that?” Or “I think we should focus primarily on small groups for our program every Sunday night.” Or “I prefer to meet in homes twice a month instead of at the church . . .” The list can go on and on. From their responses, you can gauge what the leadership values most by what they like or don’t like, affirm or don’t affirm.

If I would’ve taken this approach with my supervisor earlier, had I taken the initiative to do this, it would have brought so much clarity to what he valued most for my work and the youth ministry.

3. My sense of urgency was viewed as too low for my supervisor.

When the infamous consulting group came to our church a couple of months prior to my firing, one of the leadership

characteristics they measured was our “sense of urgency.” This quantifies a person’s inner drive, self-will, the “go and get it done” attitude, or the “see the problem, solve the problem” mentality. If it’s rated high, it means you don’t need anyone to tell you to do something; you will already be accomplishing it before someone says it needs to be done. On a scale of one to ten, one being “no sense of urgency” and ten being “the highest sense of urgency,” the consulting group’s results showed that top leaders fall in a range between 8.5 and 9.25. I rated an 8.25; my supervisor was at 9.5.

In my mind, I had a fairly high sense of urgency, but I will be the first to admit that I don’t get a huge sense of satisfaction from completing tasks. From my 8.25 perspective, I thought my supervisor needed to “take a chill pill.” 😊

When I see a need, I go all out in accomplishing it, but if it is not a priority in my mind, I don’t have that same kind of urgency to complete it. This doesn’t mean I neglect small tasks. I thrive on completing honey-do lists for my wife; I pride myself on getting my kids ready to go to church or school in the morning. I see those as valuable things.

So a sense of urgency is there, but my supervisor didn’t see it. Why? Because I didn’t see the need to pursue some of the things he wanted to see accomplished in the ministry. The things he wanted to be done were not a high priority in my mind. I will flesh this out later, as more time and conversations brought to light his perspective regarding my lack of urgency. But I realized that what was a “sense of urgency” issue for my supervisor was in reality a “sense of purpose” issue for me.

Killing Pride

Those first few days were eye-opening for me as the Lord revealed these three blind spots. Within them, there was one common thread: pride. I thought I knew more than my supervisor because I had the experience and had led successful youth ministries in the past. Things were going well, and God was moving in these students' lives. I knew the more I kept focusing on discipleship, relationships, and building up leaders, the more we would see God do some amazing things. That had to be my priority. There's a lot of *Is* in these last few sentences—five to be exact. God was really tearing away any ounce of pride in my heart.

James 4:6 details what God thinks about pride. He opposes those who are prideful. In my time as a “successful” youth pastor, pride grew bigger and bigger in my heart, and I was blind to that growth. God wanted nothing to do with my pride; He opposed it completely. I needed to see this and let Him kill the pride in my life—daily.

Whether you are doing the firing or being fired, pride is something that can easily creep into your heart as you serve in ministry. Satan will do whatever he can to sneak pride into our minds and hearts to get us off track from pursuing humility. Remember, Satan's the author of pride; it's pride that caused him to be cast out of Heaven. It's one of his best tactics to destroy the work God wants to do in and through us all. So my prayer is that you would examine your heart in any conversation, during any disagreement, and determine your motivation. More times than not, there are going to be many Holy Spirit-driven motivations to move forward with ideas, programs, and purposes in ministry.

But as the battle with sin wages war inside of us, pride can creep into our ministry pursuits. Seek understanding from one another; push aside selfish agendas and be willing to listen and try something new, even if it doesn't make sense from your experience.

God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble, and we are all in desperate need of God's grace. Don't allow the enemy to gain any foothold in your heart. Pursue humility and put to death any trace of pride in your heart. Whatever part of the refining process you find yourself in, take a moment now and ask God to reveal any pride that was or is still in your heart. Confess it to Him and receive the grace that He freely offers when the proud humble themselves before Him.

That day, as I reflected on my supervisor's notes, pride was destroyed in my heart. It was clear to me that God's word for me to "prepare" while I was at home before youth group was necessary so I would have an open mind to the hard truths I uncovered. I needed to open my heart to the fact I harbored pride that had to be exposed.

A Note to Leaders

A pastor once told me that a yearly performance review should never come with surprises. Because you have worked diligently in meeting consistently with your staff, pointing out things that need to be corrected or changed, and affirming things that are done well, the "performance review" is more of a recap of the year. If there is something your staff member needs to work on, they should've had several meetings with you, addressing the issue, as well as communicating solutions for resolving the challenges.

In the same way, a firing should not come as a surprise unless, of course, there is a moral or legal failure. It was ironic that a few months before my firing, we had spent a couple of days going through the consulting firm's six-step process on how to manage, train, and lead volunteers, especially ones who weren't "getting the job done." But none of this was laid out for me.

Leaders, a decision to fire someone should never be made alone. Ideally, you would consult other leaders in your church when thinking through this type of decision, but what I also mean by alone is that your staff member needs to be a part of this process too! There should be multiple conversations leading up to this final decision, conversations in which you clearly communicate something along the lines of, "Hey, if you can't do this or you keep doing this after talking through this multiple times, then our next step will look at how you can transition out of this job." A seemingly harsh truth like this is taken with more love and respect by your staff member when you have put in the extra effort to listen to them, share your concerns with them, help them work on solutions, and honestly evaluate their progress.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Kyle Isabelli knows firsthand the pain, grief, and shame that comes with being fired from a church ministry position. He's not only experienced it personally, but he's witnessed fellow staff members and beloved pastors go through similar situations. Through it all, Kyle learned to process his pain and came through his firing with a passion to help hurting staff and care for disillusioned congregants. He has shared his wisdom on podcasts and has counseled dozens of church leaders navigating forced staff transitions. Kyle has been in full-time ministry for over ten years and currently serves as the senior pastor of a church in the western suburbs of Chicago, where he resides with his wife, Maria, and their two children.

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