

TRIUMPH

TRIUMPH

Overcoming Life's Challenges

GLENN THOMAS
WALTER

The RML Solutions Group, Ltd
Columbus, Ohio
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Dedication

This book is dedicated to everyone who has pushed themselves beyond the threshold of defeat. It is literary therapy for everyone who's been challenged by life's unexpected events. May God endow you with the faith to endure, courage to overcome, and the strength to **TRIUMPH!**

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THE TRIAL

“Rejection will either refine you or ravish you.”

~ Bishop Joey Johnson

I sat there quietly, listening to the reverberating silence. There were probably twelve or thirteen people in the conference room, but their voices were mere echoes of muffled background noises. I was there, hearing but incapable of listening. Only once had I experienced this mystical disconnect before in my life. I specifically remember sitting in my sister's condo the day after her tragic death, surrounded by people but hearing what sounded like inaudible chatter on a talk radio show. Although I was physically sitting in the room, my mental acuteness was, well, undetectable. I was trying, but not particularly well, to follow a conversation that had occurred earlier in the meeting. Without notice, the Senior pastor dismissed me from a professional role I had performed for eighteen years: thirteen years as Assistant pastor and five years as Associate pastor. Before this meeting, I had never been dismissed from any position in my life.

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The Senior Pastor was to decide whether he wanted to retire on November 15th. The trustees arranged this meeting for that specific purpose. According to the church's constitution, the assistant pastor automatically becomes the acting Senior pastor after a senior pastor's death, resignation, or retirement. This gathering was a mere formality. After the meeting began, it didn't take long for the expected to occur: the Senior pastor announced his retirement via telephone – he didn't want to come to the meeting, as it was lightly raining.

The Corporate Secretary asked, "Pastor, did I hear you correctly? You are retiring?" He replied, "Yes, effective January 1st." Then, something questionable happened; the state overseer reminded the Pastor that an announcement was to be made. "Oh, yes," the Senior Pastor replied. His next words were unexpected. "I am dismissing Dr. Walter as Assistant Pastor." Huh? I leaned forward toward the teleconference phone. "You're dismissing me? Why are you dismissing me?" I demanded to know! He replied, "You want to go in your own way." I quickly and assertively responded, "What! What exactly does that mean?" He repeated the statement with a quivering, raspy voice, "You want to go in your own way." Again, I stated, "I don't know what that means!" I confidently reminded the Pastor, "On Saturday, you requested my number from your executive secretary," – but he suddenly couldn't find my number. "Did you not ask her to inform me that I was ministering on Sunday?"

He stated, "I did not!" "Pastor!" I said exasperated, "You called your executive secretary and a pulpit minister, informing them you were endeavoring to

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reach me but could not. Therefore, that same pulpit minister preached on Sunday. Are you saying you didn't do any of these things?" He replied, "No!" Easily, I could have shown the trustees my phone log validating the date and times of the secretary and minister's call. Or I could've easily played the saved voicemail message from the minister informing me that the pastor allegedly couldn't reach me.

The minister purposely shared this information, hoping to prevent any rivalrous feuds between us. It was within my means to immediately dispel and disprove everything the pastor stated. However, I chose otherwise. As a servant leader, I don't believe in encouraging people to practice things that easily entangle or hinder them. And, for some, merely telling the truth is very entangling.

At this point in the meeting, I knew this nonsense was not about my character, spiritual maturity, leadership skills, or pastoral dedication. There was a cleverly disguised political agenda carefully packaged to dismiss me. A person with knowledge of a private meeting informed me that the overseer and pastor met earlier in the week at a restaurant to discuss my dismissal. Although stunned, I had the presence of mind to ask questions about my last day of employment and gather personal items before leaving the premises.

The pastor informed the board that I was being removed as an assistant pastor, but my role as Chief of Operations was still in effect. The Chief Financial Officer, a man of integrity, stated, "I have some serious problems with the timing of this dismissal. Dr. Walter could have been

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dismissed at any time during his tenure; why now?" "Why is he being dismissed after the pastor announces his retirement?" Of course, his question was vigorously dismissed. One trustee sharply contested, "The pastor has a right to dismiss anyone he wants!" This meeting was reminiscent of being in my sister's condominium after her death, watching her husband and family functioning while in shock. While sitting in that room, all motion seemed to come to a standstill. It felt like I was an actor in a Spike Lee film, where the camera does a 360-degree spin around an actor standing or sitting still. Everything is twirling but the actor. There were no words to describe what happened, only speechlessness. A contentious discussion ensued about who is going to serve as an interim pastor.

Finally, the senior pastor stated, "I am going to announce a new assistant pastor." Abruptly, the overseer said, "That would be a mistake!" Then, he shared with the pastor and board of trustees that he had helped many churches through these difficulties. And, of course, he could help this assembly as well. He needed the pastor to, essentially, hand over the church entirely to him. He required complete, unquestionable pastoral authority to govern the church as he deemed appropriate. He would, of course, help guide the church through this succession and new pastoral selection process. Gleefully, the Senior Pastor agreed. His exact words were, "That's a wonderful idea!"

A visiting regional pastor, invited by the overseer, ended the meeting with a prayer. I will never forget his compassionate, discerning prayer, "Lord, remember Dr. Walter; he is a man of excellence." After this political

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fiasco, I stood, shook the visiting Regional pastor's hand, quickly walked out of the room, and proceeded to exit the building. While opening my car door, one of the trustees opened the exit door and briskly walked towards me. The gentleman informed me that the state overseer privately shared with one of the trustees; he already had someone in mind for the pastoral position before tonight's meeting. The trustee continued, "This meeting was shameful and disgraceful." The trustee promised to continue praying for my family. I extended my blessings to him. Perhaps his statement would have meant more to me if he had stated it at the meeting instead of the parking lot.

The drive back home was eerily reminiscent of the journey to Youngstown, Ohio, after receiving the news that my sister had been killed in a car accident. Somehow, God's mercy became my taxi home. My mind was discombobulated. The car lights were blurred, streetlights seemed foggy, and even familiar sounds were muffled. Repeatedly, I prayed these words, "Lord, remember your servant," as I traveled home.

My thoughts revolved in a paradoxical feedback loop. The entire experience seemed contradictory and surreal. What had just happened? Who were those people in that room? Did I just sit in a meeting and observe eighteen years of my life get discarded in thirty minutes?

"We are never more blind than when we are doing violence in the name of God."

~ French Philosopher Rene Girard

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Finally, I arrived home. The Corporate Secretary called and left a thoughtful message. Text messages started to appear. What a nightmare! Why? Why was this happening to me? Unknowingly, that night was merely the beginning of the demolition and subsequent private and miraculous reconstruction of my ministry and life.

I awoke the next morning with a sense of numbness, which I would describe as emotional disconnection. There was, however, something very familiar about this feeling. Although my physicality was intact, all emotionality had been annulled. And that dreaded, deafening silence was still there. It was just hanging in the atmosphere like smog on the Los Angeles morning horizon. Attempting to get out of bed was an exercise in futility. It was not going to happen. And suddenly, the impact of public disgrace weighed on my physical being like a 300 lb. crocodile.

Of all the trustees present during that meeting, only one had the conviction and courage to challenge the wrongfulness of what occurred. Another trustee was kind enough to call that evening and leave a voice message of encouragement. For many years, the pastor was frequently absent due to health reasons.

I served as interim Senior Pastor (C.E.O.) for a combined total of five years, while continuing to perform as Chief of Operations (C.O.O.), leading a staff of 14 employees and 58 volunteers, and overseeing a one-million-dollar annual corporate budget. I served as Assistant Pastor (Vice-Chairman)/Chief of Operations for thirteen years without ever being reprimanded or receiving verbal warnings for non-performance, not once.

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“To me, the thing that is worse than death is betrayal. You see, I could conceive death, but I could not conceive betrayal.”

~ Malcom X

I took less than four weeks of vacation leave during my professional tenure as an Assistant pastor!

There were many 13-hour days filled with organizational diagnosis and strategic business planning, volunteer management meetings, weddings, hospital visits, all hours of the night, grief counseling sessions too numerous to recall, and three to four hundred funerals throughout my tenure. So, I knew each trustee's family members. I knew their husbands, wives, mothers, fathers, children, and grandchildren. I celebrated with them in birth and too often grieved with them in death. And occasionally, I admit, there were times I thought of my homegoing service while sitting in that pulpit preparing to deliver a eulogy. Thinking about going home to be with my Lord and Savior was not that difficult. I did not fear going home to be with the Lord; I feared the reality of being betrayed by those claiming to be the Lord's disciples.

While lying on my back in bed, I posed a question to God: “Why would anyone functioning as your symbolic representative on earth purposefully engage in such malevolent, misleading, and injurious behavior?”

Faithfully, I have helped the pastor and served this congregation for twenty-five years, first as a volunteer and later as a salaried professional. It was hard to believe. And yet, it was reality. There was no escaping

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the dreadful obviousness of the truth. There was no apparent neglect of responsibilities, abuse of authority, or insubordination. I was undoubtedly not dismissed for scriptural reasons, including private admissions of sinful conduct.

My professional performance was not substandard. Repeatedly, the senior leader made public and private comments, especially at trustee board meetings and church services, commending my service. The pastor often commended me in private conversations that I was “a blessing” to him and the church. From a legal standpoint, the church didn’t violate any employment laws because Ohio is an “employment-at-will” state. This law means that either the employer or the employee may terminate employment at any time and for any reason, unless a contract exists. For me, however, this wasn’t a question of legalities. It was not just a matter of agreeing to the law, but also of deciding to align with the higher spiritual authority, which requires pastors not to dismiss employees without cause.

“I know joy comes in the morning, but how long the night.”

~ Rev. Jessie L. Jackson

And yes, I prayed, but the pain neither subsided nor did it cease to hurt. In chapter five, we will explore the misconception that prayer heals *every* hurt. Don’t become offended. I am implying prayer is not needed. And, of course, I am not dismissing the power of prayer. Never underestimate the importance of spiritual intercession.

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Occasionally, however, additional *help* is required in the form of other interventions. Let me explain. For example, bleeding will occur if you accidentally cut yourself. If it's severe, after seeing blood flowing from your body, prayer should be instantaneous! "Jesus, in your name... help me, Lord, right now!"

Now, that prayer, combined with a few stitches from an E.R. physician, is the right formula for a healthy recovery. And whenever needed, psychological intervention and emotional encouragement are also appropriate. A prescription of prayer, encouragement, and intervention was appropriate in my case. After a long, endless night of restlessness ended, I awoke to what felt like a fortress. Unlike Superman's fortress of solitude, my fortress felt like an abyss of perpetual darkness. As I opened my eyes, I immediately repeated the words spoken before I fell into a light sleep: "Lord, remember your servant."

"There will be times when all you can do is think the name Jesus."

~ Bishop Norman

Reverberations of hurt mixed with unbelief continued. I wanted to get up but couldn't. Finally, my ego, id, superego, and conscience agreed to send a text message to a certified grief

counselor. This particular counselor happens to be a good friend. Within the hour, the phone rang. After thoroughly explaining what transpired over the past 24 hours, I said, "I haven't felt this heaviness since the death of my sister, Chelly." With frustration, I

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continued, "I don't know how to describe what I'm feeling." After a moment of silence, the counselor spoke these words, "Dr. Glenn, I believe that you are in a state of shock, and what you are experiencing is called grief." He continued, "Consider the events of the past 24 hours; you were stripped of your professional identity, executive status, positional authority, and public reputability." "Yes, I agreed. That's it! That was an accurate and precise assessment. But I quickly and angrily protested, "I still don't understand the deceitfulness and intentional malevolence!" With melodious calmness, the counselor answered, "Dr. Glenn, Girard said you were the answer to a complex problem." Of course, the counselor was referencing the life-long work of French philosopher and anthropologist Dr. Renee Girard.

In his book *Scapegoat*, Dr. Girard explains that whenever culture eclipses compassion, people can justify whatever means are deemed appropriate to achieve an objective. In other words, when a group forms a collective mindset, anyone disagreeing with that mindset on any decision will be either removed or dealt with harshly.¹

The Chief Financial Officer learned this lesson quickly and harshly during the board meeting. He dared to disagree with the collective's mindset. Moreover, according to Girard, the collective will choose culture over compassion. The group will enviably accommodate whatever society's culture (or religious belief system) requires. Rarely do collectives demonstrate compassion when culture becomes

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ingrained in religious rules, dogmas, doctrines, bylaws, or traditions.

Biblical history is replete with examples of religious groups that were unmerciful when dealing with anyone who disagreed with their traditions and spiritual culture. Have you ever read examples of empathetic Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, or Essenes demonstrating compassion for anyone? Anyone showing compassion while the group mindset has determined that understanding or empathy is not an option will get severely reprimanded.

In summary, Girard writes, “No pity is shown to friends since every sign of pity is dangerous...ultimately, the persecutors [collective] always convince themselves that a small number of people or even an individual can be extremely harmful to the whole society.”²

Therefore, someone must be the object of reproach for the group to condemn. Some unrighteous act or behavior, “*Wanting to go in his own way,*” must be an apparent cause for the pastor’s dismissal of an employee. A sacrifice was required to assuage the pastor’s dissatisfaction with being forced to retire due to his inability to fulfill his professional duties.

The board’s unwillingness to initiate an investigation or, at minimum, challenge the questionable motives and timing of an employee’s dismissal was eclipsed by a collective mindset submerged in a culture blinded by religious traditions. These cultural traditions reflected no acknowledgment of a Biblical mandate that requires

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godly leadership to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.

Neither the senior pastor nor the board, as a group, embraced lovingkindness toward me. There was no attempt to walk humbly with God, which means upholding God's desire to show compassion and leniency.³

The religious belief system demanded that the culture, not understanding, be acknowledged and esteemed. In other words, the traditions of religious culture nullified God's Word and made it useless.⁴ The religious culture gave its pastor carte blanche. It gave the pastor complete freedom to act as he wished or thought best, disregarding Biblical practices, principles, or compassion toward me. "Allowing" me to remain as C.O.O. was merely an operational ploy to keep everything working smoothly without interruption until new senior leadership arrived.

The culture prevented the board of trustees from using its constitutional authority to hold the Senior pastor accountable. The board's silence equates to compliance. Silence says we, the board of trustees, agree. The pastor did nothing wrong; his motives were unquestionable. The overseer's suggestion to take over rather than allow the church's constitution to be fulfilled as intended was circumstantial at best.

One unfinished item of business was all that remained. The pastor needed absolution to justify an oblique and unjust decision. The trustees needed to ensure that the congregation viewed their actions as ethical and

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impartial; they needed to be applauded as a dedicated group of fiduciary officers looking out for the church's best interest.

My dismissal provided the overseer with the perfect excuse to govern, because no pastoral leadership was in place to conduct the day-to-day clergy functions.

Lastly, I was the quintessential Scapegoat needed to ensure that no board member was seen as noncompliant with the pastor's decision, i.e., I got exactly what I deserved without question. I was Rene Girard's answer to a complex problem. The church ministry needed to go forward without me. Several people sitting at that table would ensure that the pastoral search process would proceed without seriously considering my application for the senior pastor's office.

The counselor and I talked for over an hour. Afterward, I needed to decide whether to return to that work environment. His counseling blessed me. That session, the first of many related to this topic, gave me the insight needed to move forward. This grievous nonsense could not have happened at a worse time. I was still endeavoring to deal with a physical health-related matter and my father's death.

Sustaining emotional balance to make healthy decisions is not necessarily easy, but it is critically important, especially to your overall quality of life. Perhaps, most importantly, making the right choices is paramount to a successful future. If we were to be unpleasantly and transparently honest, there are situations when we want to walk out the door, get in the car, break off the rearview mirror, and throw the phone away. Start the