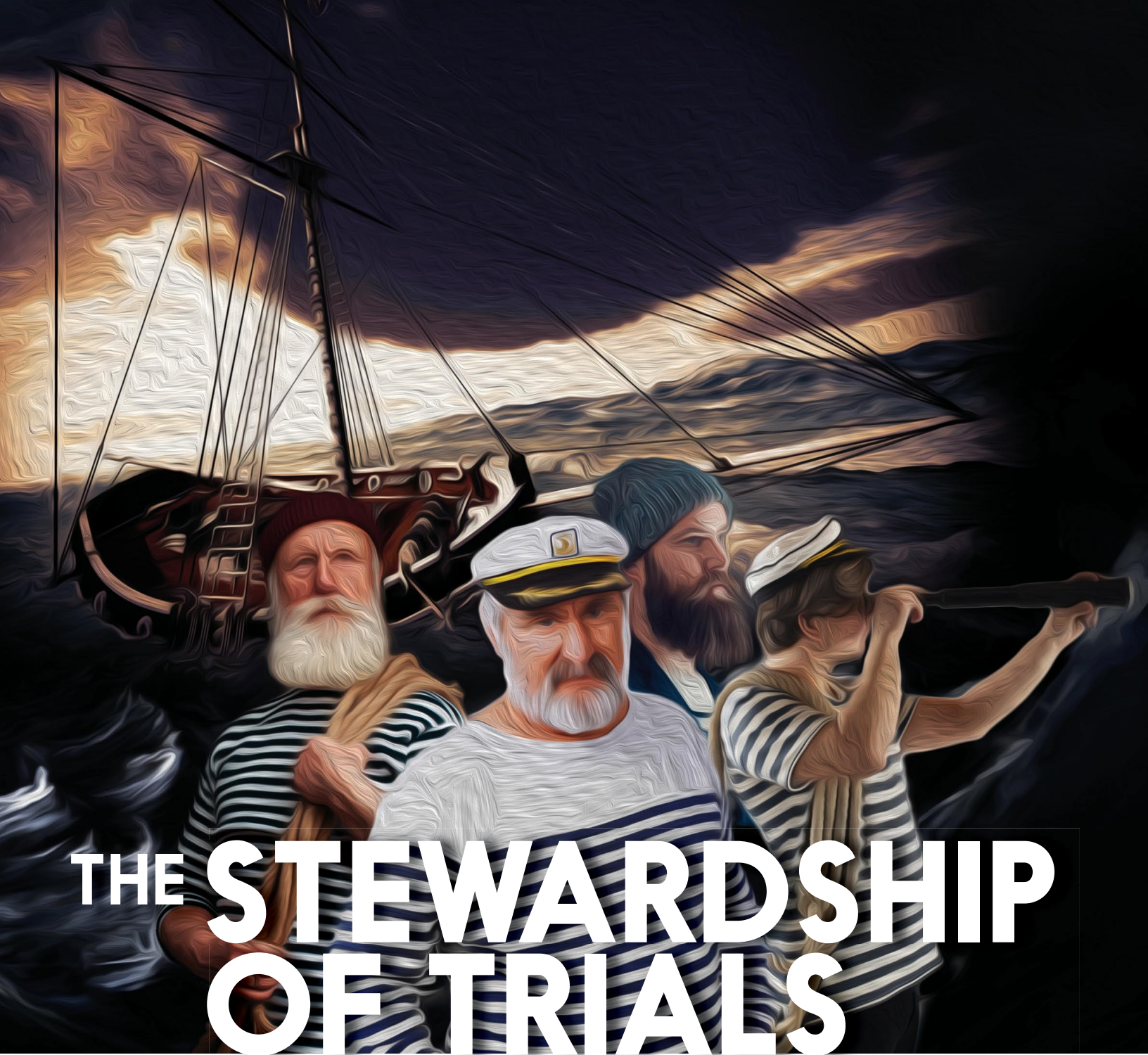




THE STEWARDSHIP OF TRIALS

NATALIE C. WINTER

Abstract

This paper examines the concept of biblical stewardship as it pertains to trials that leaders face. Grounded in James ¹, a three-part framework for the biblical stewardship of trials is proposed. Biblical and historical examples of leaders who employed the framework components are provided to demonstrate practical application.

Introduction

When considering the concept of stewardship, tangible resources are often the first things to come to mind. In this context, business leaders may naturally think of human or capital resources as the focus of their stewardship. However, a business leader's stewardship over intangible assets is readily apparent; brands, intellectual property and relationships are all intangible and yet require stewardship.

Physical resources are only the beginning, and perhaps not even the most critical object of the biblical mandate. Business leaders bear responsibility for many things, and a large portion of them will never appear on a balance sheet.

Within this broader context, it is worthwhile to consider that anything that God lays in our path may be an opportunity to exercise biblical stewardship. While trials are often considered as something to “get through” or to “avoid,” a Christian should consider that the trial that they face may be an opportunity to be used by God for the purposes of His Kingdom. The Christian’s perception of trials should therefore differ from the world’s. Instead of considering how to escape the trial, the Christian leader should consider how to steward them for God’s glory and acclaim.

Definition of Trial

Although trials may easily be recognized, they can be difficult to define. For this discussion a trial is any circumstance in which an individual perceives that existing resources are insufficient to successfully navigate a situation. The resources that the individual requires can be psychological, relational, financial, spiritual, intellectual, or social, or other resources that a person determines are necessary but are circumstantially insufficient. Additionally it is important to recognize that the sufficiency of resources is subjective. At times a leader may think there are insufficient resources when in reality the leader has everything they need. The lessons discussed below would apply to situations in which resources are quantifiably inadequate and in situations in which the leader simply perceives that they are.

It should be also noted that from a biblical perspective not all trials are the same. Scripture makes clear that sometimes we experience painful circumstances as a consequence of our sin.¹ While many of the lessons articulated below would still apply, if the pain that we experience is a result of our heavenly Father’s loving discipline, then Scripture makes clear that our first response is to repent.² God is at work in the midst of these circumstances too, but the business leader should recognize their own culpability in creating them. In these situations, seeking forgiveness and restoration should be the first response.

Definition of Stewardship

Caldwell, et al. writes that “ethical stewardship integrates long-term wealth creation, a commitment to the transformational interests of stakeholders, and creating organizational systems that reinforce both instrumental and normative organizational goals.”³ This definition builds upon Davis, Schoorman and Donaldson’s work that states “stewardship theory defines situations in which managers are not motivated by individual goals but rather are stewards whose motives are aligned with the objectives of their principals.”⁴ These discussions make

clear that a consideration of the good of the whole, rather than the individual, characterizes stewardship. In addition, the steward seeks to obtain some goal beyond their individual interest. This principle is seen in the Parable of the Talents as well. The servants managed the money on behalf of the master; the servants who did so successfully received a reward.⁵

Proposed Framework

Recognizing that all leaders will go through trials, the question remains – “how does a leader accomplish this difficult task?” When resources seem insufficient, how can a leader biblically steward the circumstance not only to serve the good of the whole (perhaps to the detriment of the leader’s own interest), but also to bring glory to God? While a turnkey, universal answer is unlikely to emerge, Scripture can provide a framework that can guide the actions and behaviors of a godly steward.

Perhaps the most well-known Scripture passage on the issue of trials occurs in James 1. In this passage, the Christian learns both the purpose of trials as well as the right response towards them. First, the Christian is admonished to “count it all joy” (v. 2) when trials occur. Secondly, the Christian is instructed to “let steadfastness have its full effect” (v. 4) so that godly character emerges.⁶ Lastly, the believer is told that if they lack wisdom, they should, in faith, ask God for it (v. 5). Later, the reader is reminded that when trials are endured, there is a blessing that comes, and it is a blessing that has an eternal reward (v. 12). Stewarding trials in a godly manner, therefore, can have an impact both in this life and in a Christian’s eternal life with Christ. Based on this passage, a conceptual model for stewarding trials can be developed.

Developing a Mindset of Joy

In the second verse of James 1, instruction is given regarding how the Christian should perceive trials. The instruction to “count it all joy” is elsewhere translated “consider”⁷ and this perhaps more clearly demonstrates that the first response for godly stewardship of a trial is mental rather than behavioral. Before the time that a leader can be observed stewarding the trial, it is important that the leader gains the right perspective on it. As difficult as it is to imagine responding to a trial with joy, the passage demonstrates that the Christian can do so when they consider the purpose of the trial in their life. Trials are used by God to produce believers that are “lacking in nothing.”⁸ There may be physical pain and relational turmoil as a result of the difficult circumstances, but Christians can know with confidence that God is using them for their good and for His ultimate glory.⁹ Therefore, in order to steward a trial in a godly manner the first response is not to act, but to prayerfully reflect on the benefits that God will produce through the trials that the Christian experiences.

Observing godly leaders can help illuminate how to put this directive into practice. History and Scripture are replete with examples of men and women who developed a joyful



mindset when considering the trials that they encountered. A common thread in the accounts of these individuals is that the joy that they experienced in the situation was based on their knowledge of God and not based on the details of the trials. Dan Cathy, CEO of Chick-fil-a put it this way, “The truth is that there will always be reasons to be unhappy, just as there will always be reasons to be happy. The difference comes down to where we choose to focus our attention.”¹⁰ Paul demonstrated this when despite pleading three times for his “thorn in the flesh” to be removed, he continued to suffer. He could not immediately see the purpose in the trial, but learned to rely on the grace and strength of Christ.¹¹ Corrie ten Boom and her sister Betsie demonstrated this when, while being imprisoned by the Nazis for providing refuge to Jews, they chose to trust the character of God rather than being overwhelmed by their circumstantial conditions. Despite the pain and despair they faced in the concentration camps, they chose to give thanks for the fleas that infested their quarters as it meant that they could hold their Bible studies without interference from the guards.¹² They rejoiced over God’s provision and recognized that their circumstances were a result of the sinfulness of men, and not an indictment of their Father’s care.

When a steward does not intentionally develop a joyful mindset in considering the trials that they are facing, negative consequences soon follow. When the Israelites were led into the dessert by Moses, they focused on all they lacked rather than being joyful for all that they had been given. As a result, they complained, were disciplined, and ultimately failed to realize the purpose for which God had called them out of Egypt. Although developing a joyful mindset starts internally, it has external results. The Christian steward must recognize this, and must take care to intentionally cultivate joy by focusing on

the character of Christ, despite, or perhaps especially, during difficult times.

As the believer develops the discipline of cultivating joy in the midst of trials, it may be natural to contemplate why the situation occurred. A critical aspect of this process is recognizing that the person going through the trial may not be fully equipped to process it from an unbiased and informed perspective.¹³ Consequently, as part of the reflection process it may be worthwhile for the leader to solicit insight from trusted allies. These allies may be able to help the leader more accurately reflect on the circumstance and may help the leader identify the benefits that God is producing through them. Developing the practice of considering trials from the position of joy is not a solo endeavor; Christian brothers and sisters are an integral part of this process.

Purposeful Perseverance

The second imperative found in James 1 is to “let steadfastness have its full effect” (v. 4). Implied in this instruction is the suggestion that instead of stewarding the trials in a godly manner, the Christian can work to thwart the work that God is seeking to accomplish through the painful circumstances. In other words, there is a participatory component of stewarding trials in a godly manner. The Christian leader must not merely seek to “get through” the trial, but instead should align their objectives with the objectives of God. Broadly speaking, this means that the Christian sees the trial as a means by which God is preparing him or her for the work that He has prepared for them to do (see Ephesians 2:10). As John 15:2 states, God uses a refining process in the Christian’s life in order to prepare the

Christian to do even greater work on behalf of His Kingdom. Trials then need to be seen not as a derailment of God's plan, but as a tool that He wields in the life of His children to bring about His good purposes.¹⁴ In accepting this, the Christian leader accepts the need to persevere through the trial in order to allow God's work through it.

Author and speaker Elisabeth Elliot illustrates this concept of purposeful perseverance well. Elliot's husband Jim was murdered by the Aucas Indians when he moved to Ecuador to present them with the Gospel. Despite her grief at Jim's passing, Elisabeth persevered in her husband's commitment of seeing the Aucas reached for Christ when she moved with her young daughter and another missionary widow to Ecuador. Over time, their dream of presenting the Gospel to the Aucas in their native language was realized and many became believers.¹⁵ The trial of losing her spouse did not prevent Elisabeth from confidently pursuing the call that God had placed on her life.

Biblical examples of purposeful perseverance can also illustrate what this concept looks like in practice. One of the most well-known biblical examples of this is Joseph. Joseph was sold into slavery at the hands of his brothers, was unjustly thrown into jail by his master where the Pharaoh's cupbearer left him there to languish even though Joseph had once helped

him. Despite these difficulties, Joseph demonstrates his purposeful perseverance when, upon encountering his brothers after his rise to power he said, "And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life."¹⁶ Even through his trials, Joseph was confident that God was directing his steps. He did not concentrate on the injustice done against him, but instead remained focused on pursuing God's purposes for his life.

Evident in both Elisabeth Elliot and Joseph's accounts is the mindset that trials do not derail God's purposes. Endurance, therefore, is not merely an act of dogged determination, but a confidence that God will be faithful to complete the work that He is doing (See Philippians 1:6). When immersed in a trial, the Christian business leader would be wise to seek out God's purposes through prayer, meditation on Scripture and the wisdom of godly counsel. In doing so, the Christian business leader can work to align their response with God's plan.

Purposeful perseverance necessitates a trust that God's sovereign hand is over all that happens in our lives, and therefore the good and the bad things can have eternal significance. While Joseph was probably tempted to give up after he had been enslaved and then wrongly thrown into prison, he chose instead to faithfully serve God in whatever He called him to do. As a result, even the earthly authorities could witness a differ-



ence in Joseph and bestowed on him power and prestige. Conversely, no one would probably have blamed Elisabeth Elliot if she had never returned to Ecuador to finish her husband's work and yet as a result of remaining focused on God's purpose and choosing to endure whatever He had called her to, many came to know Him.

Throughout the literature on organizational management, there is a focus on how trials can be avoided. While it would be foolish for any leader to seek out trials, it is important to recognize that all leaders will experience them. For the Christian leader, there is further evidence that trials should be expected. John 16:33 (ESV) states "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world." The Christian leader should accept that while all leaders will have trials, Christian leadership is compounded by the fact that the Christian does not struggle just against flesh and blood.¹⁷ Christ promised that His followers will have trials; stewarding them in a biblical manner means making a commitment to endure them faithfully so that Christ's purposes are achieved.

Seeking Wisdom

In what may seem to be a jump in the discussion, the next imperative that is recorded in James is the instruction that if a believer lacks wisdom, he or she should petition God for it. Yet we can readily recognize that trials are often experienced or intensified because of a lack of wisdom. In order to biblically steward trials, the Christian leader must not rely on their own knowledge

and perspective. Instead, divine wisdom is needed so that the Christian can adjust their actions in order to conform to God's purposes and plans. Additionally, the biblical leader should recognize that seeking godly wisdom is not done for the benefit of the leader alone. The leader's words and actions are emulated throughout the organization and therefore they have a "trickle-down" impact on how the organization responds. If Christian leaders align their behavior with God's purposes, it is likely that a similar behavior will be adopted by others, even people who are not yet believers. Additionally, as Christians conform to the godly wisdom that they receive, they are more fully equipped to face additional trials in the future.

Former NFL player and coach, Tony Dungy, provides a unique example of this concept. While struggling to earn a spot on a NFL team, a teammate encouraged Dungy to seek out God's wisdom and consider whether there was a greater purpose to the pain he was experiencing. This practice of seeking God's perspective built his reliance upon God which would allow him to weather other storms that would later come his

way. Additionally, Dungy had the benefit of seeing how God used the trials he experienced to better equip to be the leader of a professional football team.¹⁸ Dungy states it this way: "Why does God allow pain in our life?...Because we're loved by God and the pain allows us to head back to our Father."¹⁹

David Green, CEO of Hobby Lobby, had a similar realization during a painful period of his organization's history. In 1985 after overleveraging the company, diluting the brand, and facing its potential demise, Green recognized that the business problems he faced were a result of his personal pride. His response was to pray in order to seek God's direction. That prayerful petition for wisdom prompted him to cut costs, reduce inventory and ultimately save the company.²⁰

From an earthly perspective, it may be posited that trials are a high price to pay for obtaining wisdom. While that may be true, it is also worth considering that even from a worldly perspective, trials may be the necessary motivation for the adoption of new behaviors. In a study of entrepreneurial failures, Ucbasaran, et al. found that success creates assurance in the existing models that entrepreneurs employ, but it is failure that prompts them to alter those models in order to adopt new behaviors.²¹ Additionally, as Shepherd, Patzel and Wolfe discuss, learning takes time and does not occur at universal rates.²² Therefore, while painful, trials do serve a purpose. It is often through seeking understanding and adopting new, more effective behaviors, that at least part of that purpose is revealed.

Additionally, regularly seeking and applying godly wisdom in the midst of trials helps ensure that once deliberate responses become habitual. In other words, lessons learned from trials can help develop more productive

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and effective leadership techniques. When these techniques are embraced and practiced, they become habits. Leaders whose habits are aligned with godly principles will not only be better equipped to biblically steward their trials, but they will be more effective in their other leadership roles. It may be a trial that brings a leader to seek godly wisdom, but that response will pay dividends in both their personal walk with God and the management of their organization.

Outcomes

Stewarding trials in a manner that is consistent with the principles in James 1 holds many promises for the Christian leader.²³ In the opening verses, James articulates that enduring trials in a godly manner produces believers that are "perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."²⁴ Later, the reader learns that those who steward trials in a godly manner are in fact blessed.²⁵ In the intervening verses, James writes about pride and humility,



which serves as a reminder that the things of this world are temporal, while the things of God's Kingdom are eternal. Just as wealth and prominence will pass away, so will the trials that a Christian faces. An eternal perspective towards trials brings both temporal and eternal rewards.

The question may be asked; what if a Christian fails to steward his trials with godly wisdom? Then they will not receive the blessings that are promised in James 1:12 and the Christian leader may be ill equipped to successfully face difficult situations that may occur in the future. Additionally, the unbiblical response of the leader can "trickle down" the organization, prompting others to respond in kind. Perhaps

even more concerning, the testimony of the leader may be compromised because in the midst of difficult circumstances they did not demonstrate faith and confidence in God. C.S. Lewis states that pain is the megaphone that God uses to reach a lost and dying world.²⁶ If the Christian leader responds to trials in a way that is contrary to Scripture, that megaphone can be muted and the leader's usefulness in God's Kingdom jeopardized.

Conclusion

As stated at the beginning of this article, inherent in the concept of stewardship is the concept of dominion and authority. In trying circumstances, it often feels like one's control is diminished, rather than strengthened. Therefore, it may be difficult and counterintuitive to think of trials as something that the businessperson should steward. However, despite the chaos that trials may bring, Scripture teaches that God is working through them, just as He is working through pleasant circumstances, to accomplish His purposes.²⁷ Therefore, as God's workmen, it is important that a biblically-minded businessperson considers how to steward the trials that God has entrusted to him or her in order to be increasingly conformed into the image of His Son.²⁸ There may be little in the public discourse regarding biblical stewardship of trials, but that doesn't make the act of doing so any less important.

James 1 makes it clear that a believer's response to trials should be multi-dimensional. First, the believer must gain the right perspective on the existence of the trial by considering it a joy that God will use the painful circumstance to accomplish some good in their life. Secondly, the believer must endure through the trial, knowing that in perseverance God's purposes will be accomplished. Finally, in order to ensure that the endurance of the believer realizes its Heavenly aims, the Christian leader must seek God's wisdom in order to know how to best respond to this particular circumstance and to align their behavior with God's intended outcomes. It is not difficult to see that this framework has a cyclical nature in that as wisdom is sought and attained, the believer is able to respond more joyfully to the trial, therefore helping them to more graciously endure it, and as a result to create further alignment with their behavior and God's plans.

Notes

¹ See Galatians 6:7-8; Hebrews 12:7-11

² See Revelations 3:19; 1 John 1:9; 2 Corinthians 7:9-11

³ Cam Caldwell, et al., "Ethical Stewardship – Implications for Leadership and Trust," *Journal of Business Ethics* 78, (2008): 154.

⁴ James H. Davis, F. David Schoorman, and Lex Donaldson, "Toward a Stewardship Theory of Management," *Academy of Management Review* 22, no. 1, (1997): 21.

⁵ See Matthew 25:14-30

⁶ James 1:4, ESV

⁷ James 1:2, New International Version

⁸ James 1:4, ESV

⁹ Romans 8:28

¹⁰ Dan Cathy, "Be Happy," *Cathy Family*, June 20, 2014, <http://www.cathyfamily.com/dan/blog/be-happy.aspx>.

¹¹ 2 Corinthians 12:7-9

¹² Corrie ten Boom, *The Hiding Place*, (New York: Bantam Books 1974)

¹³ Ucbasaran, et. al, "Life After Business Failure," *Journal of Management*, 39, no. 1 (January 2013): 184.

¹⁴ Although outside the scope of this paper, this brings up a challenging discussion regarding the role God plays in the trials that a Christian experiences. The book of Job makes it evident that some trials are the result of Satan's desire to tempt the believer. However, Scripture affirms that everything that happens is done under the sovereign hand of God (see Job 42:2, Psalm 115:3 Isaiah 46:9-10). Whatever the particular cause of a specific trial, the Christian can take confidence in that nothing happens outside the rule of our Sovereign King.

¹⁵ Jan Wismer, "Elisabeth Elliot: Pioneer and Prayer Warrior," *Today's Christian Woman*, October 2013, <http://www.todayschristianwoman.com/articles/2013/october/elisabeth-elliott-pioneer-and-prayer-warrior.html>.

¹⁶ Genesis 48:5, ESV

¹⁷ Ephesian 6:12

¹⁸ Phil Richards, "Former Colts coach Tony Dungy says he won't coach again, but his work is far from done," *Indianapolis Star* (Indianapolis, IN). October 25, 2013, <http://www.indystar.com/story/sports/nfl/colts/2013/10/24/former-colts-coach-tony-dungy-says-he-wont-coach-again-but-his-work-is-far-from-done/3178835/>.

¹⁹ Art Stricklin, "Tony Dungy voices the pain & lessons from his son's suicide," *Baptist Press*, (Nashville, TN). February 3, 2006, <http://www.bpnews.net/22595/tony-dungy-voices-the-pain--lessons-from-his-sons-suicide>.

²⁰ Brian Solomon, "David Green: The Biblical Billionaire Backing the Evangelical Movement," *Forbes*, October 8, 2012, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/briansolomon/2012/09/18/david-green-the-biblical-billionaire-backing-the-evangelical-movement/>.

²¹ Ucbasaran, et. al, 183.

²² Dean A. Shepherd, Holger Patzelt, Marcus Wolfe, "Moving Forward from Project Failure: Negative emotions, affective commitment, and learning from the experience," *Academy of Management Journal* 54, no. 6 (2011), 1248-1249.

²³ Contrast in outcomes may be made with leaders who ineffectively stewarded trials. In Scripture, both King Saul and King David faced threats to their reign. King Saul responded with fear, intimidation and reckless pursuit of ungodly gain. King David, however, responded with prayer, trust in God, and pursuing biblical counsel. In the end, King David's throne was established in Israel, while King Saul is a cautionary tale of leadership that failed to achieve its potential and caused significant destruction. In the business world, examples also abound. Bernie Madoff and Ken Lay are infamous examples of leaders who squandered the trust of their constituents in a time of trials. As a result not only were they criminally indicted but their organizations, investors, employees, and their communities were financially and emotionally ruined. As CEO of Hobby Lobby, David Green relied on prayer and godly wisdom when faced with economic uncertainty. As a result, the organization withstood the trial it faced and is now thriving.

²⁴ James 1:4, ESV

²⁵ James 1:12

²⁶ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, "The Problem of Pain Quotes," Goodreads, May 18, 2015, <http://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/2976220-the-problem-of-pain>.

²⁷ Romans 8:28

²⁸ Romans 8:29

About the Author



Natalie C. Winter is an associate professor of marketing at California Baptist University. Her research interests include marketing strategy and alternative media, marketing education, and organizational leadership with a specific focus on generational differences and their impact on employee-employer relationships. She is passionate about maximizing leadership and organizational effectiveness. She holds a doctorate in Organizational Leadership from Pepperdine University.