

LifeWord Summaries

Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership

Ruth Hayley Barton

A Chapter Summary

Trevor Lloyd
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Introduction to LifeWord Summaries

LifeWord book summaries are based on two assumptions. The first is that many books, especially those based on Christian truth, are potentially life-imparting, life-transforming and life-shaping. The second is that many Christians are not reading them.

I always recommend reading the actual books as the ideal, and signpost readers to them and to other books by the writers. But there are various reasons why not every Christian will ever get around to reading many of them.

In writing these summaries, my hope is that you can at least access some of the truths, insights and principles contained in the books. Like someone who has found a great treasure, even if not everyone can explore and sift through it for themselves, I can, at least, scoop up some of its riches and share them through these summaries. As well as benefiting from the rich insights from the books I summarise, readers can then go on to explore these and other good books for themselves.

There are three ways you can use LifeWord Summaries:

1. **A Taster** - there are many excellent books, old and new, out there but you have limited time. A quick, simple summary helps you to decide in which books you are going to invest your time. (See my book reviews at www.differentkingdom.com also).
2. **A Refresher** - you read the book some time ago and are not sure you have time to read it again, though you'd like to. A summary can refresh your memory.
3. **A Digest** - whether due to time, inclination or challenges with sustained reading, you know you are unlikely to read a particular book. A summary of the main ideas and insights maybe the next best thing.

This summary of **Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership** should take about 30 minutes to read. If you prefer to listen, in the future there will also be an audio recording of the summary at www.differentkingdom.com.

Trevor Lloyd (July 2024)

Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership

By Ruth Hayley Barton

Main Message

This book is not just about leadership. It is about personal transformation. About how the crucible of leadership can help forge such a transformation and how that inner work in turn connects to our leadership in the public arena. It is about how we can lead from that place of transforming encounter in the presence of God. It is not, though, just a book of general, sentimental or inspirational encouragement to stay close to God as leaders. It explores, in penetrating depth, how we can lead from the soul. This means being willing to let God deal with the dark side of our leadership, our brokenness and our ego. It involves a commitment to keep seeking God through the classic spiritual disciplines, especially through silence and solitude. And it includes a willingness to be changed. The author explores these and other issues through key moments in the life of Moses. This extraordinary leader, and friend of God, learned to lead not from striving or even from strategy but from divine encounter, and from allowing God to transform and strengthen his soul.

Chapter Summaries

Introduction

Leaders are looking for more in their lives and their leadership. The 'more' that they are looking for is the transformation of their own souls in the presence of God. This transformation, and the leadership that comes from it, is the subject of this book. It is about connecting the personal, spiritual transformation of our souls in the private place to our leadership role in the public arena. Transformation is about the inward forming of our lives to become more like Christ. For leaders, it involves seeking God in the crucible of leadership. The author explains how she will draw on the life of Moses to help explore the principles of strengthening the soul of leadership.

Among other things, it shows that this is not just for contemplatives but for active leaders who are leading people somewhere, with all the challenges that brings.

Strengthening the soul of your leadership is an invitation to enter more deeply into the process of spiritual transformation and to choose to lead from that place. It is an opportunity to forge a connection between our souls and our leadership rather than experiencing them as separate arenas of our lives.

Chapter 1 – When Leaders Lose Their Souls

All leaders know the gap between their public roles and their personal emptiness. As Wesley taught his 'bands' we must learn to ask ourselves - 'how is it with our souls?' We must attend to our own souls. It starts by listening to the uneasiness we feel about this gap. The soul is like a wild animal - tough, but tender and shy. It is often hiding in the brush. It needs to be coaxed out. There is often a tension between what the soul needs to be healthy and what leadership requires of us. A spiritual leader lives with those tensions and waits for a way to open up. This requires seeking after God in daily disciplines. What those we lead need from us most of all is that we are seekers after God. We are those who are feeding our own souls first. Moses lasted in leadership because he allowed the challenges of leadership to take him into the presence of God for a personal encounter. There he learned to trust God in the crucible of ministry. The discipline of solitude is the key discipline for strengthening the leader's soul. Not least because it challenges the ego and false self that public leadership roles can often cause us to rely on, rather than on God's work in our soul.

...the most important thing I can do as a leader today is to keep seeking God in the depths of my own soul—no matter what it costs.

Chapter 2 – What Lies Beneath

The author considers the traumatic impact of Moses's childhood and his inevitable confusion of identity and sense of belonging. Maybe one of his coping mechanisms was repressing anger. But what was under the surface came to the surface. He killed

a man and was found out. What lies beneath the surface of our lives matters. When Moses saw what lay beneath, and that others saw it, he fled into solitude. Such an experience can be the start of a journey of self-discovery where we face and take responsibility for the dark forces beneath the surface. When a crisis reveals these dark forces the most important thing to do is to get into a place of solitude with God and let him do a deep interior work in us. We must pay attention to what is happening. Moses settled down in privacy and obscurity, simply receiving what was given to him and doing what needed to be done. The well he sat down next to was a symbol of the hidden life - his own depths, and the depths of God. We must beware of rushing and having too great an expectation of solitude. Most of it is God's work beneath the surface that we don't even realise. All of us have a dark side to our leadership and we cannot be a force for good unless we take ourselves into God's presence in solitude and let him do his work in us. It was the most important thing that Moses could do for what lay ahead of him.

...to try to press on without paying attention to whatever it is that is bubbling up from way down deep is the most dangerous thing we could do.

Chapter 3 – The Place of Our Own Conversion

In the solitude of the wilderness, Moses's soul was able to settle. He was able to receive what he was being given in that moment and to come home to himself. He was able to recognise his own struggle with identity and belonging through living as an alien in a strange land. As adults, leaders must get to the place of taking responsibility for themselves. We have to be aware of who we are and what has shaped us. We have to acknowledge and own the destructive patterns that we have used to protect ourselves. We want to get to a place where we are leading in response to what God is doing in us rather than from reactions that are rooted in the patterns shaped by our past. In solitude, we can see these patterns for what they are, and face ourselves. Then we are ready to surrender ourselves to God, knowing only he can change us. Separated from our illusions, we can allow God to take us on 'the purgative way.' He does this to restore, not to punish, but it often involves a sense of falling apart as we let go of our coping mechanisms.

As Parker Palmer observes, “A leader is a person who must take special responsibility for what’s going on inside him or her self, inside his or her consciousness, lest the act of leadership create more harm than good.”

Chapter 4 – The Practice of Paying Attention

Moses just gave himself to what was before him. But, in the routine tasks, he noticed the bush that burned but was not consumed. And he went over to look. He paid attention. In a time when it feels like you are being dismantled, don't try to grasp at anything or make anything happen. Just accept where you are and what you have to do, but pay attention to what God is doing. Whether it is in the mundane or the miraculous. When we pay attention, God speaks to us. But our lives are often not set up in a way that encourages attentiveness. We need to practise the spiritual discipline of turning aside to look, to notice in the here and now, in the moment. We need solitude for this. We must also pay attention to the stirrings in our own hearts. God wants us to give ourselves to what brings us life rather than what drains us of life. This is why leaders must craft times of quiet in their busy lives in order to pay attention

Learning to pay attention and knowing what to pay attention to is a key discipline for leaders but one that rarely comes naturally to those of us who are barreling through life with our eyes fixed on a goal. One of the downsides of visionary leadership is that we can get our sights set on something that is so far out in the future that we miss what’s going on in our life as it exists now. We are blind to the bush that is burning in our own backyard and the wisdom that is contained within it.

Chapter 5 – The Conundrum of Calling

When God has his attention, the first thing he talks to Moses about is his calling. His calling was interwoven with the identity of his true self and his personal history. Calling is an awesome thing - holy ground - as we realise the hand of God has been orchestrating our lives toward this meaningful work. Calling is about who we really are and not who we'd like to be or think we should be. Calling also calls us to become who we are not yet. The problem with the call to be our true self is that the false self has been doing its stuff for years and it is hard to untangle ego from true self.

One way to know the true self is the memory of unguarded moments in childhood when we did what we most liked doing. These are indications of who God made us to be before we thought in terms of what we needed to be or thought we should be. The idea of calling in the church is much abused. It can be an excuse for doing just what we feel like doing. But calling is firstly relational. It is about God and us. We will feel inadequate but God will not be impressed with our objections. His answer will always be the promise of his presence in the crucible of leadership. Fight it out with God in solitude so that you deal with any ambivalence about your calling or it will leak out among the people. Ministry is hard work and there is a lot of pain and little glory. But there are significant encounters with God along the path that both disorient and reorient us. Calling means you must face the meaningful question about the meaning of your life. And you realise can do nothing else without damaging your soul.

Being called by God is one of the most essentially spiritual experiences of human existence, because it is a place where God's presence intersects with a human life. Our calling emerges from who we really are—in all the rawness and sinfulness of it as well as in all the glory and God-giveness of it.

Chapter 6 – Guiding Others on the Spiritual Journey

The best spiritual guides are those who have made the journey themselves and know the terrain. The best preparation for leading others on the spiritual journey is faithfulness in your own spiritual journey. This 'exodus journey' is not linear. It is a cyclical process that gradually leads us in the direction of greater maturity and freedom. The stages of the journey for you and for people you guide are as follows.

- 1) *Preawareness*. We are unaware of our need to move/change but God is moving us to
- 2) *Awareness*. We may try to avoid it but denial keeps us in bondage. We have to take responsibility and look issues in the face, yet also see the possibility of a new way.
- 3) *Turning Point*. Things get worse before they get better but this brings us to a point where we are willing to do something.
- 4) *The Roundabout Way*. The kindness of God does not take us the direct route as it would involve more than we could handle. We learn here that God is not in a hurry to get to the promised land but is more concerned with our inner transformation.
- 5) *Times of Testing*. There will be

some real obstacles but note that people's reactions are not so much to you as the leader, but to the stage of the journey. 6) *Learning to keep still*. Moses gets to a different place where he is not swayed by people's primal fear and herd response but is attuned to God's presence. He is therefore able to help them still themselves and trust God. 7) *Training in waiting*. You can draw on such inner strength if you have learned to wait on God in your own life. You learn in solitude - in 'the boot camp of the soul' - to wait for God's timing.

Moses' faithfulness to his own spiritual journey was the best possible preparation for leading the Israelites out of their long bondage and into the freedom that God had for them.

Chapter 7 – Living Within Limits

Moses had to learn an important lesson about delegation from his father-in-law, Jethro. He had to change his life and leadership lifestyle and it began with finding other spiritual leaders and learning to delegate. But to do this, he had to face the fact that he was not indispensable. He had to acknowledge that he had taken on too much, a very common leadership mistake. If we don't live within our limits we become depleted. Signs of this depletion include things like irritability, hypersensitivity, restlessness, overworking, escapism, neglecting spiritual practices etc. Moses had to reorganise the leadership structure. Sharing the burden with other, well-chosen spiritual people is the only way to be faithful over the long haul. It is important to know the field God has called you to. Don't try to be someone you are not, don't compare yourself to others. This comes from the narcissism we can all be prone to. It leads to not accepting the field you have been allotted with its boundaries. We looking at others and want more. We must accept the different kinds of limits we face - physical, time, stage of life, season, etc. Refusing to live within limits leads to depletion and burnout. Learning to live graciously within limits leads to a life of depth, dignity and substance.

Living graciously within the boundaries of our life as it has been entrusted to us gives our life substance...Living within limits is not in any way an acquiescence that is despairing, passive or fatalistic. Rather it honors the deepest realities of the life God has given us.

Chapter 8 – Spiritual Rhythms in the Life of the Leader

Part of the job of leadership is to help the community establish healthy spiritual rhythms, daily and weekly. Sabbath was a very real and concrete rhythm through which God's people lived out their trust in God. It involved a radical reordering of their lives. However, our culture is caught up in busyness. This is true for pastors also. Jesus was more concerned with helping his disciples establish healthy rhythms than with their ministry reports (Mark 6:31). Christian busyness keeps us from being present to God and others. It leads to 'sloppy desperation' and to spiritual lethargy that hinders true spiritual insight and leadership. When busy, we become reliant on outside voices to help us. When we are rested, we can discern God's will for our particular situation and moment. Sabbath is the linchpin discipline. Establish rhythms of work and rest, engagement and retreat. We need retreats for silence and solitude or eventually the stuff in us that we need to face will leak out in ways that are damaging to ourselves and to others. For those of us who use words a lot in our leadership, the more important is the discipline of silence. When we don't speak from our own impulses, we learn to hear God and discern his guidance.

There is nothing more crucial to the staying power of the leader than establishing rhythms that keep us replenished—body, mind and soul.

Chapter 9 – Leadership as Intercession

Being criticised is part of the experience of leadership. Moses learned not to take such criticism personally, recognising that it was people's projection of their own fear. Instead, he turned it into intercession. We see this repeated pattern with Moses. He had learned not to argue with the people or to try to prove himself. Rather, he cried out to the Lord for them, even those rebelling against his leadership. He asked God for guidance for the people but was fully reliant on him. We must not pray and then really rely on our own answers. We have to cast ourselves fully on God, dependent on him in a continual posture of intercession (see Ex.17 and the battle of the Amaleks). Our retreat into solitude with others on our heart helps us to see what intercession really is. It is not us thinking we know what to pray for them. It is listening for the prayer that the Spirit is already praying for them. We sit

with God and wait to see who he brings to our hearts and minds. We often don't have any words to say but just hold them before God. Any guidance should be given not grasped. If I say I am going to pray for someone, it is better to say that it will be as God brings them to mind. This may just mean holding them before God, but it is good to create space to be in God's presence on behalf of others. Being attentive to our own spiritual journey helps us to stay in touch with the suffering and desire of others, without needing to fix them. A true spiritual leader carries the pains of others in his or her soul. Interceding for those we lead should be at the heart of our leadership.

There is no intellectual brilliance or strategic thinking or administrative excellence or gifted preaching that can make up for the ability to intercede for others in this way. This is the work of spiritual leadership.

Chapter 10 – The Loneliness of Leadership

There is a loneliness that comes from seeing what others do not see. And from knowing that you cannot give up on this vision even if others do. There are times when this feels too much to bear. Moses's deepest disappointment and disillusion came when faced with the people creating and worshipping the golden calf. He was willing to sacrifice his own life for the people but he was not prepared to go on without the assurance of God's presence with them (see Exodus 33). Feeling abandoned by God is the deepest kind of loneliness. The presence of God was the only thing that gave this journey its meaning. Leaders face pivotal moments when they realise that even the God-given vision, the promised land, is not more important than the presence of God to them. We all need that sense of his presence with us. The loneliness drives us back to God and we cry out from deep within for his presence and to see his glory. This meant for Moses, in the cleft of a rock, in a hidden place of solitude, he experienced a revelation of God's goodness and mercy. His willingness to enter into solitude led to an encounter with God and a revelation of his goodness that would now sustain him. And his face shone with it! This loneliness, where we must be faithful to the call, is an absolute of leadership. And these moments when we know that his presence is more than the vision, more than

the promised land, is our moment of greatest freedom. Freedom from being so driven by the goal that you sacrifice intimacy with God. You know you can't do it.

This kind of loneliness — being in a position where we must take total responsibility for ourselves and for what God is calling us to do no matter what others are doing — is an absolute truth of leadership...the vision we have seen is so real that it is impossible for us to go back and live as we once did.

Chapter 11 – From Isolation to Leadership Community

There is another kind of loneliness that comes from carrying the burden alone. It is too much for us and it takes its toll. We feel it especially when faced with the complaints of people, as we see Moses did in Numbers 13. Moses gets angry and painfully honest with God. He feels he can't go on. It is often difficult for Christian leaders to find community among those they lead. A paradox of leadership is that we can be alone while surrounded by people. Such isolation is a dangerous place to be. God's answer for Moses was to take of his spirit and place it upon others so that they could carry the load with him. But these others could not just be anyone. This is not just an organisational change. Those who share the leadership load must share the vision and be on the same journey. It is 'a sharing of spirit'. So we must go into the solitary place with God and receive who he is giving. It is not just about a team gathered around a task. It is about a spiritual community. It is not something we create. It is given. Living in such a spiritual community of leaders is one of the richest and trickiest of experiences. It does not happen by accident. We have to be intentional about it. This should include some agreed values for this community which are written down and worked out in agreed spiritual practices. Even then, there will be times when it fails and we experience relational heartache. At those times, we must learn to let people make their choices and only take responsibility for our own. And, realising how much Jesus values unity (see John 17), we must decide to stick with our community, not matter what others do.

When leadership flows from our commitment to being a community that gathers around the presence of Christ for ongoing transformation,

our ministry is deeper and richer and more effective for ourselves and for others.

Chapter 12 – Finding God's Will Together

Being wise and discerning is at the heart of spiritual leadership. It is one of the qualities that is meant to distinguish God's people (see Deut.1:13, 4:6-7). Our main way of discerning is by the Spirit witnessing to our spirit (Rom.8:16) and this requires a commitment to 'deep listening'. A spiritual leader leads the leadership community in this process of discernment. We have to be intentional and it involves a commitment to regular spiritual disciplines such as prayer, Scripture, listening, self-examination, confession etc. Our ability to discern what *to do* is related to our commitment *to be* transformed. Discernment is firstly a way of being and of seeing that are a habit. Any specific practice of discernment comes out of that habit of life. It begins with the belief that God is good and wants our best, and that loving God and loving others is our primary calling. There are some important steps for group discernment. 1) *Clarify the question for discernment*. And maybe listen for the deeper question beneath the question. 2) *Involve the right people*. This could include others outside the leadership group who can help, someone practised in the discernment process. 3) *Establish the guiding values and principles of the process*, maybe even considering a written covenant. It should include being willing to be really honest with each other. 4) *Enter into the discernment process with a commitment to pray without ceasing*. Pray for 'indifference' where you just want God's will. Pray for wisdom (James 1:5). And listen on many levels, to what has given rise to the question (see Acts 15). Listen to all those involved. Consider whether the discernment is being dominated by some. Enter into silence to listen within. 5) *Completing the discernment process involves selecting the option that seems most consistent with what God is doing*. What we sense is right is more than surface emotion and requires real psychological and spiritual maturity. Give time for individuals to seek inner confirmation away from the group. 6) *Finally, clearly agree together*. Then do what you have discerned together is the right thing to do.

The spiritual leader is distinguished by his or her commitment and ability to guide the discernment process so the community can affirm a shared sense of God's desire for them and move forward on that basis.

Chapter 13 - Re-envisioning the Promised Land

The author reviews the main lessons on leadership from the book, ones that come from 'seeking God in the crucible of leadership.' Moses has been a model for us and now he models one more aspect of leadership that we will all face. That of letting go of our leadership. Even though this means accepting we will not see all that we had dreamed of. But what are we to make of the apparent cruelty of God in showing Moses the promised land that he would not enter? It is not cruelty because Moses was now prepared for it. He was ready to lay down the vision because he had the most important thing - intimate union with God. When it comes to the end of his leadership and life, he is ready to let go because he has learned to be simply a soul in the presence of God. He has come to the place where God's presence is the promised land for him. The mountain which God leads him up helps him, and us, to see the foolishness of ambition and grandiosity. It gives us perspective. It is not about us. The laying down of the burden of leadership was an invitation to rest that the Sabbath had foreshadowed. He was now at rest as a friend of God and in the knowledge that this friendship would continue for all eternity. He knows God and that is where his authority as a leader comes from. It is not in any external thing but comes from the work of God's transforming presence in his own soul over the years and the trials of leadership. He is a leader with strength of soul.

What matters is the presence of God right there with you on the mountainside and being able to say yes to God in the deepest way because you are not clinging to or grasping at anything. Having that happen inside you makes you a leader who is free indeed. It makes you a leader with strength of soul.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What has been your experience of leadership and how aware have you been of the gap between the state of your internal soul and the demands of your external leadership role?
2. Can you reflect upon any crisis in your leadership role that has driven you to face yourself and seek God in deeper ways? What did you learn from this? How have the lessons that the author has explored in this book helped?
3. What does 'seeking God in the crucible of leadership' look like for you right now and how is it going to affect your leadership moving forward?



More About the Author

Ruth Hayley Barton is a leader, writer and spiritual director. You can find out more about her at her website [here](#). She is also the founder of the [Transforming Centre](#) which aims to strengthen the souls of leaders and to transform communities. She is passionate about helping people to truly change, in part because her experience of church is that too little genuine change happens, despite the promises. Of her books, I have dipped into and intend to read more fully [Sacred Rhythms](#), [Invitation to Solitude and Silence](#), and [Pursuing God's Will Together](#). Keep returning to [differentkingdom.com](#) to catch reviews of these books and others.

Disclaimer:

This is an unofficial, personal summary which inevitably reflects my own reading of the original book. I can make no guarantee that the author or publisher would validate its accuracy. If you have not read the original book, I highly recommend that you do so. This summary is intended only as an introduction and guide, and the writing of it is meant as a tribute to the value of the original work.