



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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# Dangerous Calling THE SUMMARY

Crossway 2012

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## Introduction

This is a *diagnostic* book. It is written to help you take an honest look at yourself in the heart- and life-exposing mirror of the Word of God—to see things that are wrong and need correcting and to help you place yourself once again under the healing and transforming power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It is not an exaggeration to say that I wept my way through writing some of the chapters. Still, as I did my writing, it did not leave me feeling discouraged or hopeless but, rather, with a deeper hope in the gospel and a greater joy in ministry than I think I have ever known.

This book was written to confront the issue of the often unhealthy shape of pastoral culture and to put on the table the temptations that are either unique to or intensified by pastoral ministry. I guess that means I am a pastor who is so bold as to assume that you, like me, need pastoral care and, at least in the pages of this book, I will attempt to pastor you. I do that knowing that every warning I put before you I need myself, and each dose of the medicine of grace I give you I need to take as well.

## PART 1: EXAMINING PASTORAL CULTURE

### 1. Headed for Disaster

It's no surprise to me that there are many bitter pastors out there, many who are socially uncomfortable, many who have messy or dysfunctional relationships at home, many who have tense relationships with staff members or lay leaders, and many who struggle with secret, unconfessed sin. Could it be that all of these struggles are potentiated by

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# LEADERS BOOK SUMMARIES

## Dangerous Calling

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the fact that we have become uncomfortable with looking at and defining ourselves in a way that is less than biblical? So we come to relationship with God and others being less than needy. And because we are less than needy, we are less than open to the ministry of the others and to the conviction of the Spirit. This sucks the life out of the private devotional aspect of our walk with God. Tender, heartfelt worship is hard for a person who thinks of himself as having arrived.

No one celebrates the presence and grace of the Lord Jesus Christ more than the person who has embraced his desperate and daily need for it. Ministry had redefined me. In ways I now find embarrassing, it told me I was not like everyone else, that I existed in a unique category and if I was not like everyone else, then I didn't need what everyone else needs.

Ministry had become my identity. I didn't think of myself as a child of God, in daily need of grace, in the middle of my own sanctification, still in a battle with sin, still in need of the body of Christ, and called to pastoral ministry. I thought of myself as a pastor. That's it, bottom line. The office of pastor was more than a calling and a set of God-given gifts that had been recognized by the body of Christ. "Pastor" defined me. It *was* me in a way that proved to be more dangerous than I would have thought.

### 2. Again and Again

I wish I could say that my story is unique, that most pastors don't struggle the way I did. I was set up for disaster, and if it hadn't been anger, it would have been something else. I wish I could say that in the lives of the vast majority of pastors there is no disconnect between their public ministry personas and the details of their private lives. I wish I could say that most pastors are as skilled at preaching the gospel to themselves as they are to others. I wish I could say that most pastors minister out of a deep sense of their own need. But I can't.

There are signs of a pastor losing his way. He ignores the clear evidence of problems in relationships or his own behavior, but denies or explains them away. He is blind to the issues of his own heart and doesn't trust the vision help of others. His ministry is not fueled by personal devotion. He doesn't preach the gospel to himself by feeding his soul on the realities of the presence, promises, and provisions of Christ. He doesn't listen to the people closest to him. The impact of all these things is that He finds His ministry has become a burden and no longer an act of worship.

A pastor in trouble finds it hard to be honest about his sins, weaknesses and failures. He fears how people would think of and respond to him if they really knew what was going in his life. He may even fear the loss of his job. So his responses to the concerns and inquiries of others become structured by fear rather than faith. All of this means he is no longer benefiting from the insight-giving, protecting, encouraging, warning, preventative, and restoring ministries of the body of Christ. He is trying to do what none of us are able to do—spiritually make it on his own. Autonomous Christianity never works, because our spiritual life was designed by God to be a community project.

### 3. Big Theological Brains and Heart Disease

One evening, hours into my exegesis of a section of Romans, it hit me. I had spent hours each day for months studying perhaps the most extensive and gorgeous exposition of the gospel that has even been written, and I had been fundamentally untouched by its message. It had been all grammar and syntax, theological ideas and logical arguments. It had been a massive intellectual exercise but almost completely devoid of spiritual power.

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# LEADERS BOOK SUMMARIES

## Dangerous Calling

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That evening, with my exegetical notebook in my hands, I learned something about myself and about the Scriptures. My eyes began to open to the dangers inherent in making our faith an academic exercise. Bad things happen when maturity is more defined by knowing than it is by being. Danger is afloat when you come to love the ideas more than the God whom they represent and the people they are meant to free.

I am convinced that the crisis of pastoral culture often begins in the seminary class. It begins with a distant, impersonal, information-based handling of the Word of God. It begins with pastors who, in their seminary years, became quite comfortable with holding God's Word distant from their own hearts. It begins with classrooms that are academic without being pastoral. It begins with brains becoming more important than hearts. It begins with test scores being more important than character. Have we accomplished our training task if we produce generations of graduates who have big theological brains but tragically diseased hearts?

Academic Christianity, which is not constantly connected to the heart but puts its hope in knowledge and skill, can actually make students dangerous. It arms them with powerful knowledge and skills that make the students think that they are more mature and godly than they actually are. It arms students with weapons of spiritual warfare that if not used with humility and grace will harm the people they are meant to help.

#### **4. More than Knowledge and Skill**

What makes pastors successful? I am convinced that many churches have an unbiblical definition of the essential ingredients of ministry success. Sure, on their candidate profile was a line that required, "Vibrant walk with the Lord," but these words were weakened by a process that asked few questions in this area while making grand assumptions. They were really interested in his knowledge (right theology), skill (good preacher), ministry philosophy (will build the church), and experience (isn't cutting his pastoral teeth in our place of ministry).

A pastor must be enthralled by, in awe of and in love with his Redeemer so that everything he thinks, desires, chooses, decides, says, and does is propelled by love for Christ and the security of rest in the love of Christ. He must be regularly exposed, humbled, assured, and given rest by the grace of his Redeemer. His heart needs to be tenderized day after day by his communion with Christ so that he becomes a tender, loving, patient, forgiving, encouraging, and giving servant leader. His meditation of Christ—his presence, his promises, and his provisions—must not be overwhelmed by his meditation on how to make his ministry work.

Ministries are derailed because leaders began to think they have arrived and don't do the protective things that they warn everyone else to do. It's naive to think that pastors are free from sexual temptation, fear of man, envy, greed, pride, anger, doubt of God, bitterness, and idolatry. It is vital to remember that every pastor is in the middle of being reconstructed by God's grace.

So it is essential to know the heart of the man behind the knowledge, skill, experience, and ministry strategy before you call him to pastor God's flock. You can be assured that like God's leaders of old, he will face crucial personal and ministry choice points. In those significant moments, what will win the day and determine what he will do will be his heart because, like everybody else, it is inescapably true that whatever rules his heart will direct his life and his ministry. It is vital to get way, way beyond the profile that emerges from the date on his vitae.

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# LEADERS BOOK SUMMARIES

## Dangerous Calling

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### 5. Joints and Ligaments

Pastor, have you ever asked yourself, *who am I, and what do I spiritually need?* Or have you ever thought about your pastor and asked, *who is my pastor, and what does he need in order to remain spiritually healthy and grow in grace?* Does it seem right and healthy that in many churches the functional reality is that no one gets less of the ministry of the body of Christ than the pastor does? Does it seem best that most pastors are allowed to live outside of or up above the body of Christ?

If every pastor is, in fact, a man in the middle of his own sanctification, shouldn't he be receiving the normal range of the essential ministry of the body of Christ that God has ordained for every member of the church to receive? Is there any indication in the New Testament that the pastor is the exception to the normal rules that God has designed for the health and growth of his people? Is it possible that we have constructed a kind of relationship of the pastor to his congregation that cannot work? Is it biblical to tell pastors that they won't be able to be friends with anyone, that they must live in an isolation that we would say is unhealthy for anyone else?

Let me suggest several steps that can work to bring pastors out of isolation and into more regular contact with the essential and normal ministries of the body of Christ. (1) Require your pastor to attend a small group he doesn't lead. (2) Pastor, seek out a spiritually mature person to mentor you at all times. (3) Establish a pastor's wives small group. (4) Pastor, be committed to appropriate self-disclosure in your preaching. (5) Be sure that your pastor and his family are regularly invited into the homes of families in your church. (6) Make sure there is someone who is regularly mentoring your pastor's wife. (7) Make sure your pastor and his wife have the means to be regularly out of the house and away for weekends with one another. (8) Make sure counseling help is always available to the pastor, his wife, and their family.

### 6. The Missing Community

I was raised in the "Jesus and me" privatized, individualized Christianity of the fundamentalism of the '60s and '70s. The closest our church got to an actual functioning, ministry-oriented body of Christ was a rare pastoral visit and the Wednesday night prayer meeting. No one knew my father and mother—I mean, really knew them. No one had a clue what was going on in our home. No one helped my father to see through the blindness that allowed him to live a double life of skilled deception and duplicity. No one knew how troubled my mother was beneath her encyclopedic knowledge of Scripture. No one knew.

We were a Christian family in active participation in a vibrant church, but what we were involved in lacked one of the primary and essential ingredients of healthy New Testament Christianity: a trained, mobilized, and functioning body of Christ. It was Christianity devoid of Ephesians 4, 1 Corinthians 12, and Hebrews 3:12-13.

For much of my Christian life and a portion of my ministry, I had no idea that my walk with God was a community project. I had no idea that the Christianity of the New Testament is distinctly relational, from beginning to end. I understood none of the dangers inherent in attempting to live the Christian life on my own. I had no idea that I was living outside of God's normal means of sightedness, encouragement, conviction, strength, and growth.

There is not a day when every member of the body of Christ does not need to be taught and helped to identify those remaining artifacts of a worldview without a gospel. There is also not a day when we don't need to be admonished,

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# LEADERS BOOK SUMMARIES

## Dangerous Calling

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confronted with the fact that we still look into the world's carnival mirrors and carry around distorted opinions of who we are.

Pastors, you too need to be surrounded by well-trained teachers and faithful, loving admonishers. You are in danger if anonymity allows you to be the only regular teacher you hear and to live void of a protective circle of grace-motivated admonishers.

### 7. War Zones

Perhaps we have forgotten that pastoral ministry is war and that you will never live successfully in the pastorate if you live with a peacetime mentality. The fundamental battle of pastoral ministry is not with the shifting values of the surrounding culture. It is not the struggle with resistant people who don't seem to esteem the gospel. It is not the fight for the success of the ministries of the church, and it is not the constant struggle of resources and personnel to accomplish the mission. The war of the pastorate is a deeply personal war. It is fought on the ground of the pastor's heart. It is a war of values, allegiances, and motivations. It is about subtle desires and foundational dreams. This war is the greatest threat to every pastor. Yet it is a war we often naively ignore or quickly forget in the business of local-church ministry.

First, pastoral ministry is always shaped by a war between the kingdom of self and the kingdom of God, which is fought on the field of your heart. The reason this war is so dangerous and deceptive is that in ministry you build both kingdoms by doing ministry. Things like appreciation, reputation, success, power, comfort, and control are too important to me and they begin to shape the way I think about ministry, the things I want out of my ministry, and the things I do in ministry. Remember, a pastor's ministry is not just shaped by his knowledge, gifts, skill, and experience but also by the condition of his heart.

This leads us to a second battleground in the war that is pastoral ministry: the war for the gospel. Not only should we actively battle for the gospel as the fundamental paradigm for every ministry in the church, but we must also fight for the gospel to be the resting place of our hearts. When we forget to preach privately to ourselves the gospel we declare publicly to others, we begin to seek from the situations, locations, and relationships of ministry what you have already been given in Christ.

## PART 2: THE DANGER OF LOSING YOUR AWE (FORGETTING WHO GOD IS)

### 8. Familiarity

A great danger of ministry is that familiarity with the things of God will cause you to lose your awe. What things does the awe of God produce in the heart of a pastor that are vital for an effective, God-honoring and productive ministry?

#### *HUMILITY*

There is nothing that will put you in your place, nothing that will correct your distorted view of yourself, nothing that will yank you out of your functional arrogance, or nothing that will take the winds out of the sails of your self-righteousness like standing, without defense, before the awesome glory of God.

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# LEADERS BOOK SUMMARIES

## Dangerous Calling

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### *TENDERNESS*

The humility that the awe of God is alone able to produce in my heart is an awareness of my sin and desperate need for grace. This awareness produces a pastoral tenderness toward the people around me, who give empirical evidence that they are in need of the same grace. No one gives grace better than a person who is deeply persuaded that he needs it himself and is being given it in Christ.

### *PASSION*

No matter what is or isn't working in my ministry, no matter what difficulties or battles I am facing, the expansive glory of God gives me reason to get up on the morning and do what I have been gifted and called to do with enthusiasm, courage, and confidence. So I preach, teach, counsel, lead, and serve with a gospel passion that inspires and ignites the same in the people around me.

### *CONFIDENCE*

The inner sense of well-being and capability in ministry is not untoward self-confidence but a confidence that comes from knowledge of whom I serve. He is my confidence and ability. He will not call me to a task without enabling me to do it. I can do what I have been called to do with confidence, not because of who I am but because he is my Father, and he is glorious in every way.

### *DISCIPLINE*

There are inglorious times in everyone's ministry. There are passages of time when it's going to take more than ministry success and the appreciation of the people around you to pull you out of bed to do with discipline the things you have been called to do. It is the awesome glory of God's existence, character, plan, presence, promises, and grace that gives me reason to work hard and not give up, no matter whether we are in a "good" season or one that is stormy.

### *REST*

Finally, as I face my own weaknesses and the messiness of the local church, what gives me rest of heart? It is glory that gives me rest. There may seem to be many horizontal reasons to be anxious, but I will not let my heart be captured by worry or fear, because the God of inestimable glory who sent me has made this promise: "I will be with you."

## **9. Dirty Secrets**

The dirty secret that many pastors carry, the one that is so hard for a "man of faith" to admit, is that much of what he does is not done out of faith but out of fear. It is very tempting for the pastor to load the welfare of the church on his shoulders, and when he does, he ends up being burdened and motivated by an endless and ever-changing catalog of "what ifs." This never leads to a restful and joyful life of ministry but rather to a ministry debilitated by unrealistic and unmet goals, a personal sense of failure and the dread that results.

### *Fear of Self*

There are few things that will reveal to you the full range of your sin, immaturity, weakness, and failure like ministry will. There are few things that will expose your weaknesses to others as consistently as ministry does.

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# LEADERS BOOK SUMMARIES

## Dangerous Calling

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### *Fear of Others*

Most of the people you serve will love and appreciate you and will encourage you as they are able, but not all of them. Some will love you and have a wonderful plan for your life!

### *Fear of Circumstances*

In this world of the unexpected, you are always living in the tension between who God is and what he's promised and the unexpected things that are on your plate.

### *Fear of the Future*

You always live and minister in the hardship of not knowing. In both life and ministry you are called to trust and obey and believe that God will guide and provide. You and I do not know what the next moment will bring, let alone the next month or year.

What should we do about fear? I suggest you humbly own your fears and confess those places where fear has produced bad decisions and wrong responses; pay attention to what grabs your thoughts when you have a few quiet moments; and preach the gospel to yourself.

## **10. Mediocrity**

I wonder how many pastors throw sermons together at the last minute and how many messages are not given the time necessary to communicate what needs to be communicated. I wonder how many congregations around the world are, plainly and simply, being poorly fed by unprepared pastors. I wonder how many sermons end up being boring restatements of favorite commentaries or little more than impersonal, poorly delivered theological lectures.

I am very concerned about the acceptance of Sunday morning mediocrity, and I am persuaded that it is not primarily a schedule or laziness problem. I am convinced it is a theological problem. The standards you set for yourself and your ministry are directly related to your view of God.

If you are feeding your soul every day on the grace and glory of God, if you are in worshipful awe of his wisdom and power, if you are spiritually stunned by his faithfulness and love, and if you are daily motivated by his presence and promises, then you want to do everything you can to capture and display that glory to the people God has placed in your care. It is your job as a pastor to pass this glory down to another generation, and it is impossible for you to do that if you are not being awestricken by God's glory for yourself.

Mediocrity is not a time, personnel, resource, or location problem. Mediocrity is a heart problem. We have lost our commitment to the highest levels of excellence because we have lost our awe. If you are developing original content late on a Saturday evening, you have no business preaching it on Sunday.

## **11. Between the Already and the Not Yet**

We who are called to provide and lead ministry are in desperate need of ministry ourselves. We who proclaim the message of grace are deeply in need of grace ourselves. We have not arrived. We have not moved beyond a moment-

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# LEADERS BOOK SUMMARIES

## Dangerous Calling

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by-moment need for grace. We are not yet out of danger. We are not yet free of temptation. The war for our hearts still rages. We still fall and fail. We simply have not arrived, but we are tempted to think we have because we buy into false assessments of our spiritual condition.

What about you, pastor? The fact of the matter is that you and I are still a bit of a mess. Yes, by grace we often get it right, but also often get it completely wrong. There are times when we are the exuberant celebrants of the Lord, and there are times when we are just full of ourselves. There are times when we are deeply grateful, but there are other times when we feel entitled and are demanding. There are times when we lead with a pastoral heart and other times when we are fearful, self-interested, and political. There are times when, as broken people, we meet people in their brokenness with the gospel; there are other times when in pride we just want people to buck up like we have. There are times when we live and work with God's kingdom in view; there are other times when we love ourselves and have a wonderful plan for our lives.

All of this to say that the great spiritual war doesn't rage only outside of us; there is ample evidence every day that it still rages inside of us. Gospel-driven, Christ-centered ministry, one that gives grace to those of us who hear, doesn't start with theological knowledge; no, it starts with a humble heart. It starts with a recognition of our own need and the acknowledgement that you and I are more alike than unlike the people to whom God has called us to minister.

### PART 3: THE DANGER OF ARRIVAL (FORGETTING WHO YOU ARE)

#### 12. Self-Glory

Pastoral ministry is always shaped, formed, directed, and driven by worship. Your ministry will be shaped by worship of God or worship of you or, for most of us, a troubling mix of both. Perhaps there is no more powerful, seductive, and deceitful temptation in ministry than self-glory. Perhaps in ministry there is no more potent intoxicant than the praise of men, and there is no more dangerous form of drunkenness than to be drunk with your own glory.

You and I must not become pastors who are all too aware of our positions. We must not give way to protecting and polishing our power and prominence. We must resist feeling privileged, special, or in a different category. We must not think of ourselves as deserving or entitled. We must not demand to be treated differently or put on some ministry pedestal. We must not minister from above but from alongside.

It is important to recognize the harvest of self-glory in you and in your ministry. Self-glory will cause you to parade in public your private acts of faith because you think you are worthy of acclaim. It will cause you to be way too self-referencing and you'll talk about yourself a lot. When you glorify yourself, you will talk when you should be quiet—you trust your opinions more than you trust others'—and you are quiet when you should speak.

Self-glory will cause you to care too much about what people think of you and cause you to care too little about what people think of you. You will resist facing and admitting your sins, weaknesses, and failures. You will struggle with the blessings of others. When you are full of yourself, you will be more position-oriented than submission-oriented, and you will tend to control ministry rather than delegate ministry—*Why should I give to another what I could do better myself?*



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# LEADERS BOOK SUMMARIES

## Dangerous Calling

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### 13. Always Preparing

So, here's the bottom line for anyone in ministry: you must always be careful to carry a dual identity with you, no matter where you are or what you are doing. No matter how influential you become, no matter how well known, and no matter how experienced you are, you must fight to hold onto both identities. You must think of yourself not only as an *instrument* of the work but also as a *recipient*. Your work as an instrument, does not cancel out your identity as a recipient, and your identity as a recipient doesn't weaken your work as an instrument. You and I must never approach grace only as an instrument of that grace in the lives of others; we must also remember that there is no grace that we offer to others that we don't at once need ourselves.

Are you so busy feeding others that you are neglecting the need to feed yourself? The first sign is a change in your relationship to the Word of God. The Bible has ceased being a mirror for you and is used only as a tool for ministry to others. Your worship morphs from private quest to public duty. Your Christianity becomes more about a system of redemption than about a personal relationship with the Redeemer.

Another sign of the loss of your recipient identity is that your desire to master content of the Word is not coupled with a craving that your heart would be mastered by the God of the Word. It will also result in you having a concern for others that overwhelms grief for yourself.

The final sign of forgetting your two-sided identity: pride of knowing replaces the humility of being known. You minister as one who has arrived rather than one who still celebrates the rescue of grace that, along with others, he continues to need.

### 14. Separation

There are places in all of our lives as pastors where a separation exists between what we teach others and how we live. Now, let me say that it is obvious that you have to be at a certain level of maturity to qualify for ministry in the local church. What I think we need to address is the view that any weaknesses that are exposed in a pastor compromise or potentially make a mockery of the message he proclaims. If you take this view, you think that you have to present yourself as the perfect portrait of all that the gospel is able to produce or else you will bring shame to the name of Jesus. This leaves no room to admit and seek the help that you will invariably need as a pastor, since you are still right smack-dab in the middle of your own sanctification.

But, pastor, you will never be that perfect portrait; the only one who achieved that perfection was Christ. No, rather than being a perfect portrait that assures people that the gospel is true, you and I are called to be windows through which people look and see the glory of the risen Lord Jesus Christ. It is our weakness that demonstrates both the essentiality and power of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Only his ever-present and powerful grace could enable a person, who still needs to be transformed himself, to be used as an instrument of his transforming grace in the lives of others.

This frees us from pretending that we are what we are not. It frees us from boasting about what we could never have produced on our own, and it frees the people we serve from putting us on a messianic pedestal that should be reserved for Jesus only. We must preach to ourselves a gospel of ongoing weakness and sufficient grace.

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## LEADERS BOOK SUMMARIES

# Dangerous Calling

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### 15. So, What Now?

You are called to be a public and influential ambassador of a glorious King, but you must resist the desire to be a king. This is the bottom line. This is the great internal war of ministry. You are called to trumpet God's glory, but you must never take that glory for yourself. You are called to a position of leadership, influence, and prominence, but in that position you are called to "humble yourself under the mighty hand of God" (v. 6).

Perhaps there is nothing more important to ministry than knowing your place. Perhaps all the fear of man, the pride of knowing, the seduction of acclaim, the quest for control, the depression in the face of hardship, the envy of the ministry of others, the bitterness against detractors, and the anxiety of failure are all about the same thing. Each of these struggles is about the temptation to make your ministry about you. From that first dark moment in the garden, this has been the struggle—to make it all about us.

There have been very few pastors whose ministries have been damaged by poor strategic planning. There are very few pastors whose ministries have been compromised by poor staffing. There are very few pastors who have lost their way in ministry because they didn't budget well.

There are thousands of pastors who have damaged or destroyed their ministries. They lost sight of what ministry was really about and did not protect themselves against temptation. They failed to do essential things because they did not take the spiritual war of ministry seriously. They allowed themselves to do things they would not have done if they thought they were involved in the most important war that has ever been fought.

The good news is that your Savior has dominion forever and ever. The One you look to for hope has absolute rule over every ministry situation in which you'll find yourself. It is impossible to ever be in a ministry situation, location, or relationship that is not ruled by King Christ.

Here's why this is so important: all of his promises to you depend on his sovereignty. He is only able to guarantee the delivery of his promises in the places where he has complete control. Since he has complete control over everything, there is no place in ministry where you will be unable to depend on the delivery of everything he has promised you. Ultimately, the hope for your ministry is not the success of your pastoral control or ingenuity but that a sovereign Savior will complete his plan for his church.