Jesus as Overcomer

Alex G. Wright

Christian leadership scholars have long argued that Jesus is the epitome of the perfect leader (Blanchard & Hodges, 2005, p. 4). In recent years, the application of Christian spirituality to organizational contexts has gained a great deal of popularity, especially in the United States (Mabey et al., 2017, p. 757). However, the existing literature regarding the application of Christian principles to organizational contexts "largely misconstrues and misapplies the teaching of its founder, Jesus. As a result … there is a real risk that we lose the vital contribution of Christian thought, not least some of the timeless counter-cultural wisdom of Jesus" (Mabey et al., 2017, p. 757). For this reason, it is necessary to perform exegetically sound and rigorous scholarly research regarding Jesus.

This chapter looks specifically at how Jesus led during times of adversity and demonstrated his nature as on overcomer of adversity. Patterson and Kelleher (2005) noted that adversity is almost always viewed in a negative context and is often denied or covered up for fear that it be viewed as a weakness in leadership (p. v). However, adversity can be more adequately viewed as a storm to be weathered and experiences from which leaders

A. G. Wright (✉)
Beacon Christian Church, Lexington, KY, USA

may emerge even stronger (Patterson & Kelleher, p. v). In order to study how Jesus overcame adversity as a leader, this chapter examines the narrative of Jesus' miraculous resurrection of a man named Lazarus. It is a story that illustrates not only how Jesus dealt with adversity, but how he capitalized on it to accomplish goals and further endear himself to his followers. The themes yielded by the exegetical analysis of this narrative are then discussed in the context of contemporary organizational setting.

Exegetical Analysis of John 11:1–45

John 11:1–45 shares the narrative of Jesus raising Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, from the dead. Mary and Martha sent Jesus a messenger saying, "Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick" (Jn. 11:3, NASB). Upon receiving this message, Jesus did not immediately leave to tend to Lazarus. Instead, Jesus waited until Lazarus had died before going to the village where he lived. Upon his arrival, Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Mary and Martha both confronted Jesus with the statement that, if Jesus had been there, then their brother would not have died. Jesus responded with compassion, even being moved to the point of tears, and asked to be led to Lazarus' tomb. After praying to God, the Father, Jesus commanded Lazarus to come out of the tomb, and the dead man came back to life and walked out.

It is interesting to note that Mary and Martha did not present a request to Jesus; they did not say, "Please come and heal our brother," but simply, "He whom You love is sick" (Bruner, 2012, p. 499). Whereas this may be viewed as a not-so-subtle tool employed by the sisters to get Jesus to respond to their message, it also demonstrates that Jesus' compassion was well-known. The fact that Jesus wept upon encountering the grief of the sisters and other mourners is further confirmation of this compassion (Michaels, 2010, p. 280). Whenever emotion is demonstrated in a Biblical text, it is important to examine why that emotion has been evoked and what that emotion means (Robbins, 1996, pp. 29–30). In addition to the weeping, though, the reader is told that Jesus is "greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved" (Jn 11:33). The proper understanding of these emotions is that Jesus was angry and somewhat indignant, both at the death of his friend and the unbelief of those around him (Blomberg, 1997, p. 300). According to Carson (1991), Jesus' sorrow and anger were both critical in this instance: "Grief and compassion without outrage

reduce to mere sentiment, while outrage without grief hardens into self-righteous anger and irascibility" (p. 416).

If Jesus was so compassionate, though, why did he wait two days after hearing the news of Lazarus' illness before traveling to Bethany? Waiting to leave for two more days could very well have been viewed as being disrespectful to Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, who would have expected Jesus to leave as soon as possible after receiving the message (Keener, 2012, p. 839). When Jesus and the disciples arrived, Lazarus had already been dead and in the grave for four days. This means that even if Jesus had left immediately upon receiving the message, Lazarus would have already been dead by the time Jesus arrived (Thompson, 2015, p. 245). Interestingly, the Jews believed that the soul of a person lingered near their grave for three days, hoping for an opportunity to reenter the body, but the soul would leave when physical decomposition began (Osborne, 2018, p. 94). Had Jesus arrived and restored Lazarus to life within these three days, it certainly would have been miraculous, but, based on the belief of the lingering soul, it would have been something for which the Jewish people had a frame of reference. By waiting until the fourth day when the soul had supposedly departed, Jesus was ensuring that this miracle would have the maximum impact.

While Jesus was still on the way, Martha rushed to meet him. She expressed that, if Jesus had arrived sooner, Lazarus would still be alive (Jn. 11:21). This same sentiment would be echoed by Mary as well as by the other bystanders (Jn. 11:32, 37). Clearly, Jesus had built up credibility as one who was able to heal the sick. However, in this recognition of Jesus' miraculous healing ability, there is also an accusation: Jesus' failure to come immediately had allowed Lazarus to die.

When Martha made this accusation, Jesus assured her that Lazarus would rise again (Jn. 11:23). Martha responded, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day . . . I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God" (Jn. 11:24, 27). Martha was referring to the belief in an eschatological resurrection. This was a doctrine taught in the Hebrew Scriptures. This doctrine held that, "God would look after the soul after death until, at the last day, God would give his people new bodies and remake the whole world" (Wright, 2014, p. 37). In the first century, this doctrine was rejected by the Sadducees but affirmed by the Pharisees. Since the common people tended to follow the ideology of the Pharisees, it is not surprising that Martha affirmed this doctrine (Kim, 2011, p. 58). Martha's apparent confession of faith, calling Jesus

"the Messiah, the Son of God" was not a profession of Jesus' deity, but rather a reference to the nationalistic messiah for whom the Jews had been waiting; the warrior king who would re-establish the nation of Israel (Blomberg, 1997, p. 300). Martha, and those around her, seemed to have no frame of reference that would allow for the physical resurrection of Lazarus at that point in time. Jesus was facing more than a problematic situation; he was facing a situation that those around him believed could not be remedied, a situation for which several people blamed him!

Despite the emotionally charged situation, Jesus continued to pursue the task at hand. He commanded that the stone be rolled away from Lazarus' tomb, which drew protests that there would be a stench since he had already been buried four days. After the stone was rolled away from, Jesus prayed, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me" (Jn. 11:42). Throughout Scripture, when an individual demonstrates that he/she has a special intimate relationship with God or the divine, it is important to pay attention to the actions which attest to this relationship (Robbins, 1996, p. 121). Jesus' prayer in this narrative is illustrative of such a relationship. Brownlee (2019) characterizes this prayer as "odd" because, in it, Jesus does not pray for the dead man, nor the grieving sisters, or even for himself (p. 22). Instead, Jesus prays in order to demonstrate his communion with God the Father to the surrounding crowd, including both his disciples and his detractors (Swartley, 2013, p. 283). The prayer "also functions to set up the correct interpretation of the sign. There is only one reason why Jesus is able to perform a sign such as this and that is because he is from God and is God" (Lewis, 2014, p. 159). In other words, Jesus' prayer was not a spiritual or religious exercise, but rather a form of spiritual leadership.

After saying this prayer for the benefit of bystanders, the narrative finally reaches its climactic point as Jesus said in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" (Jn. 11:43). Lazarus emerged from the grave, still wrapped in the burial cloths. That Lazarus is still shrouded in his grave garments is a concrete metaphor for the firm grip which death had had on Lazarus, a grip which was broken by Jesus (O'Day & Hylen, 2006, p. 118). This event is effectively the conclusion of Jesus' ministry: a mighty culminating miracle that illustrates his life-giving work (Smith, 1999, p. 123). Desiderius Erasmus noted that, though Jesus could have raised Lazarus with a soft word or even just a nod of his head, he chose to do so with

a great shout as a sign of the great power necessary to perform the task (Farmer, 2014, p. 426). This was not an attempt to show off or make the entire scene more dramatic, but rather it was an action befitting the incredible nature of the event that was unfolding. The bystanders had not considered the possibility that Jesus could raise Lazarus to life once again. Thus, when Jesus did the very thing that the bystanders believed to be impossible, it was appropriate to punctuate the event with a reminder that the power to perform this difficult task was because of Jesus' status as the Son of God.

It is no surprise that such an incredible miracle proved to be inspirational. Many individuals who had come to be with the sisters in their time of mourning believed in Jesus after seeing him raise Lazarus. Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1269/2010), in his commentary on the belief elicited by this event, put it plainly: "And no wonder, because such a miracle had not been heard of from the beginning of time" (p. 251). Jesus' performance of a seemingly impossible miracle inspired so many to follow him that the Pharisees were concerned that such a movement would draw the ire of the Roman Empire. So powerful was this response of faith and belief that it caused the religious leaders to decide that Jesus must die (Chennatu, 2013, p. 516). It seems that the story of this miracle spread quickly and that there was considerable popular interest in Lazarus as, again, one might expect regarding someone who had come back from the dead (Harrington, 2010, p. 94). So significant was the impact of the Lazarus story that the chief priests determined that they needed to put both Jesus and Lazarus to death (Jn. 12:10–11).

Despite the negative reactions of the religious leaders, Jesus' handling of the situation surrounding Lazarus' death is instructive in how to overcome adversity. The preceding exegetical study demonstrates how Jesus did this. The remainder of this chapter examines the themes yielded by this exegetical study and applies these themes to the context of organizational leadership.

USING ADVERSITY TO ACCOMPLISH GOALS

Jesus used the sickness and death of Lazarus to perform a miraculous sign that demonstrated his nature as the Son of God. This took some intentional planning—i.e., waiting two days to go to Bethany—and the willingness to navigate the emotions of those who were upset with him. Likewise, research has demonstrated that "people, organizations, and

nations can not only be resilient but thrive in the face of adversity" (O'Leary, 1998, p. 442). Adversity in organizations offers the opportunity to accomplish goals in new and innovative ways, but it takes creative and resilient leaders to do this (Wilson & Rice, 2004, p. 5). These are not just leaders who seek to weather the storm, but rather leaders who seek to use adversity to accomplish goals which could not have been achieved without the adverse situation. Strycharczyk and Elvin (2014) argued that what is necessary to seize the opportunities presented by challenges is a leader with mental toughness (p. 52). Leaders will often be questioned and second-guessed for how they handle adversity, and they must have the confidence and mental toughness not to be dissuaded. According to Weick (1993), leadership in adverse situations requires an attitude of wisdom that is neither overly cautious nor overly confident and embraces curiosity and openness (p. 641). Similarly, Collins (2001) wrote of the "Stockdale Paradox" which combines faith that one will prevail regardless of the difficulties and the willingness to confront the brutal facts of reality (p. 86). Collins noted that this approach "has proved powerful for coming back from difficulties not weakened, but stronger" (p. 86). Rushing to patch whatever damage has been caused by the adversity might not always be the right approach and may even prevent more significant accomplishments. If Jesus had rushed to raise Lazarus, the act would not have had as significant an effect as it did after Lazarus had been dead for four days. Therefore, using times of adversity as an opportunity to accomplish goals does not mean ignoring challenges or pretending that they do not exist. Instead, it means confidently facing those challenges head-on and using wisdom to determine how adversity can serve the big-picture goals of the organization. This is the mark of exemplary leaders: that they can "turn adversity into advantage [and] setbacks into successes" (Kouzes & Posner, 2012, p. 156).

Principle One: Biblical Christian leadership requires using adversity to accomplish goals.

Demonstrating Compassion

Jesus demonstrated compassion by comforting the mourning sisters and by his tears for the mourners and the deceased. The concept of compassion is sometimes viewed as being incompatible with the focus on competition and productivity present in many organizational settings. However, researchers are increasingly recognizing the vital role that compassion

plays in successful organizational leadership (Caldwell & Dixon, 2010, p. 91). This is true under normal circumstances and even more applicable when facing adversity. An oft quoted adage, attributed to President Teddy Roosevelt, states that "Nobody cares how much you know until they know how much you care." Knowledge is undoubtedly an essential aspect of leadership, but knowledge communicated without compassion may very well fall on deaf ears. Had Jesus reacted adversarially to the sisters, rather than with compassion, how would this have affected their— and the surrounding crowd's—willingness to follow him? According to van Dierendonck and Patterson (2015), compassionate leadership leads to the behaviors of empowerment, authenticity, stewardship, and providing direction (p. 119). Boyatzis et al. (2006) argued that compassion consists of (a) empathy toward the feelings of others, (b) caring for others, and (c) being willing to act in response to those feelings (p. 13). Similarly, Sprecher and Fehr (2005) defined compassionate love as being "focused on caring, concern, tenderness, and an orientation toward supporting, helping, and understanding the other, particularly when the other is perceived to be suffering or in need" (p. 630). It is important to note that compassion is not just an ethereal feeling, but rather a characteristic which requires concrete action. This does not mean that a compassionate leader is soft or wishy washy; a leader who demonstrates compassion is still wise and tough (Winston, 2002, p. 18). Compassionate leaders are still determined to achieve organizational goals, just not at the expense of the well-being of followers. What Jesus did that was so remarkable, and what all leaders should aspire to do, was connect compassionate love for followers with organizational goals. Jesus' raising of Lazarus was undoubtedly an act of compassion, but it also accomplished the goal of demonstrating his nature as the Son of God. This does not mean that acts of compassion should be done with ulterior motives, however. The motivation for compassion is always to serve the good of the followers rather than the leader (van Dierendonck & Patterson, p. 121). However, there are many opportunities to further organizational goals while at the same time acting compassionately toward followers. Therefore, compassion should not be viewed as an addendum to organizational leadership, but rather as an integral part of it.

Principle Two: Biblical Christian leadership requires demonstrating compassion.

Establishing Credibility

The fact that the sisters sent for Jesus when Lazarus had fallen ill, as well as their individual statements that Lazarus would not have died if Jesus had gotten there sooner, demonstrated the credibility which Jesus had built. This credibility was further confirmed by those who had come to mourn with the sisters—people who were not part of Jesus' immediate circle—who said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" (Jn. 11:36). The fact that these statements were thinly veiled criticisms does nothing to diminish Jesus' existing credibility. In fact, had Jesus not previously developed credibility regarding his ability to heal there would be no basis for criticizing him. Just as credibility was important for Jesus to gain a following, credibility is an essential aspect of organizational leadership, because leaders cannot expect followers to follow a leader whom they do not believe to be credible (Men, 2015, p. 5). Though there is not a unanimous consensus in the scholarly literature as to the definition of credibility, scholars mostly agree that two major dimensions are expertise and trustworthiness (Swanson & Kent, 2014, p. 83). To viewed as credible then, leaders must demonstrate competence in their fields and show that they can be trusted to act correctly based on that expertise. This is something that must be done consistently over time (Kouzes & Posner, 1993, p. 25). It is important to note that, even if a leader is inherently credible—if they have expertise in their field and are trustworthy—credibility only has a positive impact if it is perceived by the followers (Wright, 2018, p. 188). To an ever-increasing extent, followers are demanding that leaders prove their credibility rather than simply viewing a leader as credible because of his/her rank or position (Kouzes & Posner, p. 25). Indeed, Bennis and Nanus (1985) stated that, "Credibility is at a premium these days. Leaders are being scrutinized as never before . . . All are questioning and challenging authority" (p. 11). Followers want to be shown through consistent, practical action why they should follow leaders. In such a climate, leaders must ensure that they are establishing and demonstrating their credibility in ways that are recognized and accepted by followers.

Principle Three: Biblical Christian leadership requires establishing credibility.

Inspirational Leadership

Jesus' act of raising Lazarus from the dead inspired so many people to begin following Jesus that the chief priests decided that both Lazarus and Jesus needed to be put to death. This may not seem like a result which leaders would like to emulate. Hopefully, facing murderous opponents is not something that most organizational leaders will have to face. However, if a leader can be inspirational enough that everyone notices his/her followers' commitment, then that leader is undoubtedly doing something right. Inspirational motivation comprises "the ways leaders energize their followers by viewing the future with optimism, stressing ambitious goals, projecting an idealized vision, and communicating to followers that the vision is achievable" (Antonakis et al., 2003, p. 264). Inspirational leaders challenge followers with high standards, demonstrate optimism, and give meaning to organizational tasks (Judge & Piccolo, 2004, p. 755). Some critics have argued that inspirational leadership is unethical because it appeals to emotion rather than to reason and may exploit followers into sacrificing their personal interests (Michie & Gooty, 2005, p. 442). Whereas inspirational leadership can indeed be used for nefarious purposes—consider Hitler or various cult leaders who certainly inspired their followers—the fact that this is a tool that can be abused does not diminish its value when used correctly. Furthermore, Burns (2012) argued that leaders are most influential when they can arm their followers with moral inspiration to labor on behalf of a compelling cause (p. 34). Many a successful sports movie has been made using the model of an underdog team who is brought together and taught to win by an inspirational, though often enigmatic, coach. Inspirational leadership is not just for athletic teams and Hollywood, however. Inspirational leadership is an essential facet of successful leadership in any type of organization (Bass, 1988, p. 21). Inspirational leadership should provide followers with an energizing sense of purpose, which also builds identification with the leader and his/her vision (Avolio & Bass, 1999, p. 444). Thus, inspired followers are more likely to perform required tasks at a high level compared to those who are merely going through the motions. Rather than leaving followers to seek their own sense of inspiration, leaders must actively inspire their followers to strive for the vision and goals of the organization.

Principle Four: Biblical Christian leadership requires the ability to inspire followers.

Spiritual Leadership

After Jesus asked for the stone to be rolled away from Lazarus' tomb, he prayed a prayer that demonstrated that the event about to take place was an act of transcendent power made possible by his relationship with God. Through this prayer, Jesus showed that the act of raising Lazarus, though miraculous in itself, had even greater spiritual significance beyond bringing a dead man back to life. Likewise, those in organizational leadership positions should seek to demonstrate spiritual leadership. This does not mean that leaders need to perform miracles, but it does mean that they should help their followers understand the spiritual significance of their work and their membership within an organization. The application of spirituality to the workplace is becoming more popular despite the continued rise of secularism. Fry (2003) defined spiritual leadership "as comprising the values, attitudes, and behaviors that are necessary to intrinsically motivate one's self and others so that they have a sense of spiritual survival through calling and membership" (pp. 6954–6955). Similarly, Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2003) argued that the purpose of spiritual leadership is to help followers to experience "transcendence through the work process [and] facilitating their sense of being connected to others in a way that provides feelings of completeness and joy" (p. 13). This sense of transcendent calling and membership was certainly visible in the followers of Jesus. Though this theme is based on the leadership of Jesus, spiritual leadership should not be confused with any particular religion. Fry et al. (2011) argued that the separation between religion and spirituality in leadership research is because religion is focused on theological tenets, while spirituality is focused on the recognition and core of the inner self (p. 260). Spiritual leadership does not involve seeking to proselytize for a specific religion, but rather seeking to give work and organizational membership meaning that reaches beyond the physical nature of the tasks being completed. This type of leadership has been shown to have positive effects on both individual followers and the organization as a whole. Fry and Cohen (2009) found that spiritual leadership increases the well-being and organizational commitment of employees and also increases organizational performance (p. 265). Spiritual leadership has also been shown to increase ethical behavior and have both social and economic benefits (Duthely, 2017, p. 67). Therefore, leaders must seek to be spiritual leaders by finding ways to give their followers both a sense of calling and membership.

Principle Five: Biblical Christian leadership requires the ability to demonstrate spiritual leadership.

Leading by Example to Accomplish Difficult Tasks

When Jesus determined that he would go to Bethany to raise Lazarus from the dead, he was met with objections from the disciples. They said, "The Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" (Jn. 11:8). In spite of the danger, Jesus went to do what he had purposed to do. Then, of course, Jesus performed the miraculous task of raising Lazarus from the dead. In the time after Jesus ascended to heaven, his followers followed this example by facing deadly persecution and performing miraculous deeds of their own. Once again, this does not mean that to lead in accordance with Biblical Christianity one must raise the dead or perform miracles. It does, however, mean that such individuals must lead by example, especially during times of adversity and when dealing with challenging tasks. Influencing by example has been shown to have a much greater impact than other types of influence (Nygaard et al., 2017, p. 134). In contribution experiments, allowing the leader to contribute to the public good before the followers did led to increased contributions as compared to groups in which the leader did not lead by example (Güth et al., 2007, p. 1023). However, most leaders seem to prefer to lead with words rather than leading by example (Dannenberg, 2015, p. 71). It is undoubtedly easier to tell someone what to do rather than show them how to do it, but it is much more effective to show rather than to simply tell. For this reason, Kouzes and Posner (2002) argued, "It's not enough for leaders to simply deliver a rousing speech or talk about lofty ideals. .. Leading by example is how leaders make visions and values tangible. It's how they provide the evidence that they're personally committed" (p. 77). Studies have demonstrated that leading by example promotes group-level actions which lead to increased organizational effectiveness (Yaffe & Kark, 2011, p. 14). A leader who wants tasks done a certain way or desires to see certain characteristics demonstrated by followers must model those things himself/herself. Here, the old adage, "Actions speak louder than words," is shown to be true. This does not mean that leaders should abandon words, but rather that they must be consciously and intentionally modeling the example they wish their followers to emulate.

Principle Six: Biblical Christian leadership requires leading by example to accomplish difficult tasks.

Summary

As was noted at the beginning of this chapter, Christian leadership scholars have long argued that Jesus Christ is the epitome of the perfect leader. In order to learn to lead in accordance with Biblical Christianity, this chapter examined an example of Jesus overcoming adversity. This chapter performed an exegetical analysis of the narrative of Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead, found in John 11, for themes and principles regarding Biblical Christian leadership. The principles outlined in this chapter apply to the contemporary global organizational leadership context because they can help leaders be more successful in leading their organizations, both in favorable and adverse situations.

Discussion Questions

1. Why should leaders seek to use adversity to accomplish goals rather than simply trying to "weather to storm?"
2. Why is it necessary for a leader to demonstrate compassion when seeking to overcome adversity? What are some ways in which a leader can do this?
3. How can a leader establish credibility so that he/she will be seen as credible when seeking to overcome adversity?
4. Jesus inspired followers with the miracle of raising Lazarus; short of raising people from the dead, how can contemporary leaders inspire their followers?
5. How can workplace spirituality and spiritual leadership be incorporated into organizational settings?

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