Lesson 3: The Tests of a Leader

**Introduction**

Leadership always carries with it a series of tests. There are tests before you become a leader and the testing continues as you lead. Some tests may be failed with little consequence and other tests, if failed, signal the end of your role as a leader. It is helpful to become aware of some of the tests most leaders will face somewhere along the road. If you are aware of these tests, they will still be challenging, but you will be better prepared to pass the test.

We will consider the tests of a leader under three subheadings:

1. Tests before you are a leader
2. Tests as you lead
3. Tests after your season as a leader

Some of the tests a leader faces are character tests and some are tests of skill. Many people understand the need to develop skills and work to improve their skills. It is equally possible to grow in character and a leader or potential leader needs to be very honest about their character and be willing to make a great effort to grow in character as well as skill.

It is not a good idea to rely predominantly on gifting. Gifting will only take a person a certain distance. Faithful development of ones gifting and character will result in years of fruitful leadership. In this sense, the tests of a leader should be welcomed as friends, not enemies, because they are invariably designed by God to refine us.

*Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything (James 1:2-4).*

In this session we will consider several common tests a leader will face.

# Tests you face before you become a leader

## The test of being faithful in the little

*"Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own?” (Luke 16:10-12).*

*"'Well done, my good servant!' his master replied. 'Because you have been trustworthy in a very small matter, take charge of ten cities' (Luke 19:17).*

It is worth noting that there is a progression of responsibility. Money and possessions are the little thing. Responsibility for people is a weighty trust.

*So he asked Jesse, "Are these all the sons you have?" "There is still the youngest," Jesse answered, "but he is tending the sheep." Samuel said, "Send for him; we will not sit down until he arrives" (1 Samuel 16:11).*

*David was the youngest. The three oldest followed Saul, but David went back and forth from Saul to tend his father's sheep at Bethlehem. For forty days the Philistine came forward every morning and evening and took his stand. Now Jesse said to his son David, "Take this ephah of roasted grain and these ten loaves of bread for your brothers and hurry to their camp. Take along these ten cheeses to the commander of their unit. See how your brothers are and bring back some assurance from them” (1 Samuel 17:14-18).*

David was faithful over the sheep and serving his brothers, running errands for his father. He did this even after being anointed by Samuel.

Whatever season you are in, you are already being tested. You may not be leading the big thing you dream of, but you have some responsibility. Are you faithful in the little?

There can be many reasons for not receiving a promotion, but faithfulness in your current season may be the test you are facing.

*For promotion cometh neither from the east, nor from the west, nor from the south. But God is the judge: he putteth down one, and setteth up another (Psalm 75:6-7, KJV).*

## The test of being bypassed

How do you respond to someone else being chosen for the very thing you feel you should be doing? Do you celebrate, or sulk? Do you compare yourself with others and resent someone else’s promotion? You may be facing the test of being bypassed or overlooked.

*Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. (This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, "Lord, who is going to betray you?") When Peter saw him, he asked, "Lord, what about him?" Jesus answered, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me" (John 21:20-22).*

This test is very good for our character. It is also one of the most frustrating, lonely and painful tests. We are forced to deal with a sense of being misunderstood, undervalued, and may feel rejected, or unrecognized and unappreciated.

This test sifts out carnal ambition and exposes idols in our view of leadership.

We are humbled when we realise we are not the only answer to the need, and someone else is also able to do what we believed would make us special.

*Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time (1 Peter 5:5-6).*

## The test of identity and motivation

Whether through being bypassed or being benched, we easily take offense. What do you do when your offering is rejected?

*As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"*

*"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:38-42).*

The revelation one needs is: *You are not your offering and your gift does not define you.*

We must learn not to find our sense of value in what we do. Our identity must not hinge upon our gifting or what we have to offer.

People often expect recognition for their gifting. They expect people to be impressed or at the least, grateful. But should God be impressed; should He be grateful? When we realise God is not impressed, why do we expect man to be impressed? At the root of all this is glory – glory for us.

* *When people come into the church and expect to be given profile or opportunity because of their gifting, we would intentionally frustrate that desire. This is because character comes before gifting, and we want you for you, not for your gifting. (How can we translate this idea into the marketplace, and how we build teams and value people?)*

One of the tests before becoming a leader is: are you in it for personal glory? When you need to be put to use, when you need to be appreciated or can’t stop serving and sit at Jesus feet, it reveals you have a problem with your identity. You are finding your sense of value in what you can offer, not in who you are. This is something that requires a deeper theology of grace and some real repentance on our part.

There is great freedom when we accept the truth that God does not need us, and he accepts us on the basis of Christ’s merit, not our service. The result is leadership (and serving) is dethroned – no longer is it a means to a sense of greater self-worth. It becomes simply what it is – a privilege and a tool. It is no longer a desperate need in our quest for meaning and self-worth.

An additional benefit is we no longer feel threatened by others who are deployed in some role or other. We are freed from the pressure of having to be the best, and we can step out of the insecurity driven competitive curse of comparison.

* ***Identity test***

*Are you defining yourself by what you do?*

*Are you feeding too much of your ego off your role?*

*Do you need to be needed?*

*Are you still committed even when you aren’t contracted?*

*Are you a mercenary, a conscript or a volunteer?*

*(Mercenaries go where they get the best pay and offer their gift to the highest bidder. Conscripts are serving under compulsion. Volunteers are serving from freedom and for love).*

# Tests you face as a leader

## The test of being misunderstood

Most leaders will be misunderstood at some time or other. Many of the prophets in the Old Testament, as well as John the Baptist and Jesus, were misunderstood.

Being misunderstood is necessarily part of visionary leadership because you are, by definition, seeing what others have not yet seen!

*When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."   
"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" (Matthew 16:13-15).*

*When the men came to Jesus, they said, "John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, 'Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?'" (Luke 7:20).*

* It is easy to slide into self-pity and feel like an outsider. This leads nowhere.
* It is easy to blame people for not seeing what you see. This alienates you.

When you are in the test of being misunderstood, remember that a leader’s task is to move people forward.

To do this well, someone has said you need to increase the **clarity** of your message, not the **intensity** of it. Often when we feel we are not being understood we raise our voices, but people are not deaf, they may just be slow to understand.

A good leader will take great pains to explain, and gather, and bring people into the vision. And in spite of doing everything we can, we will still face times where people just don’t see what we see.

At this crucial moment, do not let the very ones you are called to serve and lead become the enemy in your mind. It is a test of your skill as a leader to hold true to the vision and calling you have, and to hold firmly to those you are called to lead.

Consider Jesus who to some extent was misunderstood the entire time he was on earth, and realise being understood is not essential to leading.

*So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6).*

*“When everybody around you fully sees what you see as a visionary leader, you're no longer ahead, and it's your job to start looking ahead to get a long-term vision. And if you're going to have that long-term vision, as soon as everybody is seeing what you're seeing, you're out in front again with the next piece of the vision.”*

*- Chris McAlister.*

## The test of being misrepresented

Along with being misunderstood comes being misrepresented. Being misrepresented is less heartfelt than being misunderstood. It is usually not those we are leading that misrepresent us, but external detractors.

Joseph and Jesus were both wrongly accused. How did they respond?

The key thing to understand here is that reputation and character are two different things! Joseph lost his reputation, but kept his character.

The test is: Will we engage in a battle to defend our reputation out of personal pride, or will we hold true to godly character?

*He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth (Isaiah 53:7).*

Defending oneself, justifying decisions and actions, fighting to be understood – all these may be pride-motivated and unnecessary. If you are innocent, you don’t have to spend a great deal of time justifying yourself. Let God vindicate you. Choose your battles wisely. Spend more time fighting for others than for yourself.

If you find yourself having to explain why you are the good guy too often – even in marriage or marketplace – you are not leading well.

* **For personal reflection**:

*People judge us based on our actions and we judge ourselves based on our intentions.*

*Could it be that you see your intentions and yet your actions are not in alignment and for this reason others have a different perception of you than you have of yourself?*

## The test of courage and conviction

Every leader will have his courage and convictions put to the test.

*Courage is the greatest of all virtues, because if you haven't courage, you may not have an opportunity to use any of the others.*

*- Samuel Johnson*

The story of Gideon highlights the courage we need:

*That same night the LORD said to him, "Take the second bull from your father's herd, the one seven years old. Tear down your father's altar to Baal and cut down the Asherah pole beside it.*

*Then build a proper kind of altar to the LORD your God on the top of this height. Using the wood of the Asherah pole that you cut down, offer the second bull as a burnt offering."*

*So Gideon took ten of his servants and did as the LORD told him. But because he was afraid of his family and the men of the town, he did it at night rather than in the daytime (Judges 6:25-27).*

Courage is not the absence of fear, it is doing what is right in the face of fear. This is a character test and leadership requires courage. It takes courage to lead your wife, to lead your family, to live a life of faith, to follow God, to do business with integrity and our courage will be tested.

* Further reading: Daniel 3, Daniel 6

## The test of distraction

Another test that comes from time to time is the test of distraction.

When we are busy working on the thing we should be doing, something will come along to steal our time, energy and focus.

* A secondary issue that is demanding more attention than it deserves.
* A discussion around a small decision that becomes a quarrel
* A growth challenge (e.g. Acts 6)
* A series of setbacks and frustrations

A good leader learns how to **choose the right battles**. Avoid getting caught up in the matters that are “designed” to steer you away from the important thing.

Set the priorities. Maintain boundaries. Keep the main thing the main thing. Work out what is urgent, what is important, and attempt to discern where the distraction is sent by the enemy.

* Further reading: Nehemiah 6:1-9

## The test of humility

*But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry.*

*He prayed to the LORD, "O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity (Jonah 4:1-2).*

Why was Jonah unhappy? He didn’t love the people of Nineveh and knew God would be merciful to them. Some have commented that Jonah was a respected prophet and felt being sent to Nineveh was beneath him. Whether this was a kind of racism or elitism, either way he behaved with immaturity, sulking about comfort and exaggerating his suffering (see Jonah chapter 4).

A good leader does not outgrow humble obedience and service, and all leaders will be tested at some point on this issue. Promotion and time in office should not produce a *prima donna* attitude.

## The test of taking a short cut

There will always be an opportunity to take the easy path, but more often than not, the right path is also the harder path.

Abraham “helped God” and produced Ishmael by Hagar. This detour was not a useful short cut but a wrong choice.

We must not lead simply pragmatically. The end does not justify the means. A good leader holds to high principles and is willing to make greater sacrifice and pay a higher price in order to build well.

The question is one of “What are we compromising?” and when any value or good principle is being compromised by the path in question, then that path is a short cut to be avoided.

When a parent gives in to a nagging child in order to get peace and quiet, it is a short cut that leads to disaster in the long run. When we give the people what they want, against our better judgment, we are guilty of failure to lead well (cf. Pontius Pilate).

Someone has said “slow and steady wins the race”. Good leadership is willing to build slowly and meticulously, and hold unwaveringly to what is right.

* ***Example****: You want to attract more people, so offer them novelty. What is the result? You build a consumer culture that needs to be entertained to stay happy. Someone said: “You keep them the way you win them.” In a similar vein, someone said: “Start the way you want to finish.” These statements are worth reflecting upon.*

## The test of correction and criticism

Every leader needs to learn to receive criticism. There will be a time when you, as a leader, need to be corrected. Can you admit fault? How defensive will you be? Can you genuinely receive correction and criticism?

A leader must be above reproach, but this does not mean he is above criticism. The phrase “do not touch the Lord’s anointed” has been abused by church leaders who have been placed on a pedestal and given guru status by cultish followers.

If you cannot receive correction it means in a sense you are unteachable. If you cannot be taught you cannot grow.

Critics are not necessarily enemies, and while a leader needs to have a thick skin and not be easily offended, a leader must simultaneously have a soft heart and a willingness to receive correction. When you are wrong, admit it. Take it on the chin, do not deflect the blow.

*Better is open rebuke than hidden love.*

*Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses*

*(Proverbs 27:5-6).*

## The test of failure

When David first set about bringing back the Ark of the Covenant, things went horribly wrong.

*When they came to the threshing floor of Kidon, Uzzah reached out his hand to steady the ark, because the oxen stumbled.*

*The LORD's anger burned against Uzzah, and he struck him down because he had put his hand on the ark. So he died there before God.*

*Then David was angry because the LORD's wrath had broken out against Uzzah, and to this day that place is called Perez Uzzah.*

*David was afraid of God that day and asked, "How can I ever bring the ark of God to me?" (1 Chronicles 13:9-12).*

What is interesting is how David went back to God, enquired of God, and made God-honouring changes. When the ark was finally brought into the City of David, David was at the front of the assembly, worshiping with all his might.

A lesson our failures teach us is: You’re not as good as you thought you were. But what we also learn is: God is far better than you realised.

## The test of growth

If things go well, a leader will face unique and complex challenges. Growth itself is a test and can threaten the status quo. We should not shrink back, but we will need to make changes.

Moses had to learn to delegate. His father-in-law gave him good advice and he appointed elders. In Acts 6 the apostles appointed the seven.

One of the challenges of growth will be learning to exert influence without having direct control. A good leader will delegate with real authority being given to those around him. Moses elders handled many cases and Philip had real ministry in the book of Acts.

Another growth challenge is losing culture to the “vertical invasion of the Barbarians” (Walter Rathenau). Rapid growth means newcomers who are not enculturated with the culture that you have been building come in in such quantities that your own culture is diluted. The test here for the leader is: “How do we include the new growth without being taken over by it?” The answer lies in clear communication and transfer of values and no hasty appointments of leaders.

*They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons (1 Timothy 3:9-10).*

*Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, and do not share in the sins of others. Keep yourself pure (1 Timothy 5:22).*

* *In a business context, growth often forces one to make step-changes in infrastructure and overheads while income is increasing on a curve. What this means is you move from positive to negative cash flow states around growth gear change points. It is wise to have reserves on hand before expanding. The kind of leadership required here is strategic, forward planning. Are you anticipating growth?*

*The opposite possibility also exists. Joseph administrated Egypt’s growth season in anticipation of a season of lack.*

A leader must not just jump at every current wave, but look far into the future to see where we are going and how to get there.

## The test of success

What happens if you do well? No human being is made for fame. Seldom has anybody handled fame well. We should resist it at all costs.

How do you handle compliments?

* *A little lady rendered an item in church, and after leaving the stage the pastor complimented her on her fine performance. She replied: “It wasn’t me, it was Jesus.” The pastor then commented “If it was Jesus it would have been a lot better.”*

When we do well, we must not project false modesty. Don’t just brush off the compliment as if it is not true. Rather, receive it graciously and acknowledge it, but in private, turn to the Lord and give it to him. Letting God have glory in your success does not deny what you have achieved, but at the same time, acknowledges that all the opportunities and gifts come from God.

As a leader, we must beware of people wanting to put you on a pedestal, give you a title, or “carry your bible.”

*For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men.*

*We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored!*

*To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless.*

*We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it;*

*when we are slandered, we answer kindly. Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world.*

*I am not writing this to shame you, but to warn you, as my dear children.*

*Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.*

*Therefore I urge you to imitate me (1 Corinthians 4:9-16).*

## The test of perseverance

*“The long, dull, monotonous years of middle-aged prosperity or middle-aged adversity are excellent campaigning weather for the devil."*

* *C.S. Lewis, The Screwtape Letters*

This makes me think of David, who in the springtime when kings go off to war, stayed at home. Maybe he got tired, or bored. In leadership we must watch out for boredom, burnout, and complacency. When we begin to feel indifferent about something that should evoke passion, we are in danger.

Steve Farrar wrote the book *Finishing Strong* and captured the idea in question. A good runner will cross the line at speed having run a true race.

*Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord (Romans 12:11).*

*For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline (2 Timothy 1:6-7).*

## The test of preserving and discarding

A leader must have a clear understanding of what it is that has to be valued.

*You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men" (Mark 7:8).*

These leaders had it the wrong way around!

*For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect (1 Peter 1:18-19).*

* *What is it that you must not compromise? What is it that you must defend at all costs? What will threaten the culture or values you are building?*

This is not about maintaining traditions, but staying true to values – preserving the right culture. We must keeping true to the culture that will inherit the vision.

As we move forward and bring change and innovation, we must maintain the values that are important while being willing to change the vehicles that carry those values. How we express values can change with time and context but the values must not.

## The test of following

*“Followership is the greatest leadership test.”*

*– Tanteraka Randrianjoary*

*“Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1).*

One of the great tests of a leader is that of following. No leader should lead as if he is the ultimate authority. Leaders need to build accountability into their lives and keep following others who are further along the road.

The test is: “Am I teachable?”

A wise leader does not see himself as an expert but a learner and never stops growing, learning, and following.

*Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.*

*Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead,*

*I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.*

*All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you.*

*Only let us live up to what we have already attained.*

*Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you (Philippians 3:12-17).*

## The test of building for the fourth generation

*The time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your fathers have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says the LORD. And some of your descendants, your own flesh and blood, that will be born to you, will be taken away, and they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon."*

*"The word of the LORD you have spoken is good," Hezekiah replied. For he thought, "Will there not be peace and security in my lifetime?"*

*(2 Kings 20:17-19).*

This passage seems almost as tragic as the end of the book of Judges. Such a lack of concern for the future. Good leadership looks beyond its own season and considers those who will take on the baton and run the next leg. What are you creating for the next generation to inherit? What mess will they have to deal with? Each generation should have its own battles to fight, this is why a strategic leader builds in such a way that whoever comes after them doesn’t have too much to fix.

What plans do you have, what patterns and systems have you set in motion, what sins have you tolerated? Will they be a blessing to those who come after you?

Thinking multi-generationally brings understanding to this text:

*And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation" (Exodus 34:6-7).*

This is about sowing and reaping and the delay between the two. We must lead and build in such a way that we set the next generations up for success.

Values need to be imparted faithfully and culture carriers raised up. Raising up and releasing of new leaders who are well prepared is part of the responsibility of a good leader.

*And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others (2 Timothy 2:2).*

Are you concerned about what will happen in the seasons after you leave?

# Tests you face after being a leader

There is really only one test here, and it is a huge test.   
It is almost always failed. It is…

## The test of passing the baton

Sooner or later your time to lead will come to an end, or at the very least encounter some radical change. A parent raises children to become adults. A business man hands over his business to others. A lead elder hands over to another guy.

There are lessons that go with some well-known expressions:

* Quit while you’re ahead.
* Don’t overstay your welcome.
* ***Example****: Nelson Mandela vs. most African leaders*

The test is: “How well you can let go?” This is a huge leadership test and every leader from parent to teacher to office worker should give time to think about how they will hand over.

After their season, a good leader resists the urge to exercise control, and steps back, taking their hands off, and shifts to provide only a supporting role. This role is only exercised by invitation, and no regular unsolicited counsel is offered. To let go means to let go. The former leader must not meddle and interfere. This is especially true when it comes to your grown children’s families.

When we fail to let go well, we jeopardise the very success of the next season. But when we let go well, we pass the last test of leadership.

*You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere men?*

*What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task.*

*I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow.*

*So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.*

*The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labour (1 Corinthians 3:3-8).*

* *Can you make it easy for the ones who come after you to run their race?*