“Then the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil" (Job 1:8).

In the Book of Job, we read the ancient story of an upright and blameless man who is surrounded by God's protection and blessing. Wealthy by everyone's standards, Job had a large family, livestock numbering thousands, and many servants. But suddenly, for no apparent reason, Job is ruined. In a single, unimaginable day, disaster strikes and Job loses everything. Enemies attack and steal his livestock and murder many of his servants. And as he is hearing this news, another servant reports that a storm has collapsed the home of his oldest son, killing all of Job's children. When Job's three friends hear about his troubles and go out to meet him, they are moved to tears. There before them, the greatest man among all the people of the East was struck down, sitting in ashes, his body covered in painful sores.

In the midst of great pain and suffering, Job searches for answers. He knows that God is his creator and the source of his life. God is the provider of every good thing that once was his to enjoy. And even though Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing, he does not understand his suffering and no longer sees any purpose for his life.

I share Job's story now because his situation is connected to the sense of pain, loss, and confusion that many women in the church today suffer as a result of patriarchy.

Several years ago, a CBE member who was volunteering from her home shared how much she enjoys taking her grandchildren in turns into her home for several weeks each summer. She relishes this annual opportunity to share her faith and love for Jesus with these precious youngsters. As we got to know each other over several phone calls, she shared with me her frustration over her own church's view of women. In her church, her visiting grandson, not yet a teenager, could stand up and lead the church in worship, but she, a longtime committed member of the church, could not. Can you imagine how this loving grandmother must feel in her church? She is viewed as having less authority, simply by virtue of her gender.
This is just one of the many stories CBE hears on a weekly basis. Women serving on leadership committees may find the entire structure of their church reorganized, effectively removing them from their positions. Their books may be banned or removed from Christian bookstores. Even women serving at churches open to biblical equality may be asked to team teach with a man, to avoid “stirring up trouble.” Too many women are told they “aren’t good enough” or they “aren’t right for the job.” And without truth and encouragement to refute this message, women will see this image of themselves, and not the people God created them to be.

When the church and its leaders actively minimize, undermine, or deny women’s passions and opportunities to follow their callings, everyone really does suffer. Women often take less public positions or leave their congregations in order to exercise their gifts. Or, even worse, they may ignore the call that they hear from God.

In This is My Story: Testimonies and Sermons of Black Women in Ministry, thirteen women share their journeys to answer God’s call. Each story is unique, and gives us an insider’s view of the very real struggles women face in order to follow God and to exercise their gifts and calling. Often, the road is lonely and daunting, with only God showing the way through a wilderness in which there is little encouragement or companionship. Frequently, women are separated from friends, family, and their congregations as a result of their obedience to God. Sometimes there is more hostile opposition, including active denial of a woman’s calling, as well as an undermining of her opportunity for education and experience. She may even be treated as someone to be avoided, just as a leper would be avoided in our Bible stories.

Women often struggle to believe that God is calling them to service, or they may believe that there is something wrong with them. Others struggle like Job, searching their hearts, trying to learn where they have sinned or been deceived.

As a result, many women today have spent a large part of their lives struggling to subdue their passion for ministry, hide or deny their gifts, or simply turn away from their heart-felt longings to answer a call to leadership in the church. As a result of believing that their own gifts are a mistake, a misunderstanding, or even a sign of their own rebellion, many women struggle with incredibly strong emotions including apathy, grief, and shame. Having been told that they aren’t endowed with the necessary gender to minister, teach, and preach, and because they are not able to exercise their gifts in service to the church, they feel invisible, useless, and, like Job, they lose their sense of purpose in life.

Women who have been demoralized or abused in homes or churches carry an overwhelming burden. Such women may struggle with emotions that should serve as motivation to move away from these discouraging situations. When some women become stuck in fear or shame, they may find themselves unable to move into new supportive opportunities. Women who become stuck in anger or bitterness, or become depressed, may be unable to express interest, enthusiasm, laughter, empathy, action, and other healthy emotions.

This pain is very real and can leave lifelong wounds. I strongly urge pastors and churches to reach out to these women who are hurting today. As we work to promote gift-based church leadership we must be aware that we have a natural tendency to see our situation through distorted lenses. As a result, we must be willing to examine our attitudes toward conflict, suffering, pain, and loss, and learn to act in Christian love even toward those who oppose us.

In The Peace Maker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict, author Ken Sande outlines five biblical principals that Paul gave to the Philippians, giving us a practical model for moving forward from our own pain as well as fostering reconciliation with those who have hurt or disagreed with us:

1. Rejoice in the Lord always.
2. Let your gentleness be evident to all.
3. Replace anxiety with prayer.
4. See things as they really are.
5. Practice what you’ve learned.

We need to understand, like Job, that an important step to healing and reconciliation is acknowledging God as the source of everything good. Sande encourages us to grow in holiness; our motivation must not be to satisfy our own needs to resolve a conflict or to correct someone else but to put God first in our hearts and minds. We must give our worries to God, and pray immediately when we feel anxious. And we must pray for those who disagree with us, asking God to bless them, to help us understand their perspectives, and to increase our joy, humility, love, and mercy. While pain can be overwhelming, we can trust in God who desires to bring healing, restored relationships, and a holy love between all Christian brothers and sisters.

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