Sifted: Pursuing Growth through Trials, Challenges, and Disappointments

By Wayne Cordeiro, with Francis Chan & Larry Osborne

Reviewed by Darren Cronshaw

Every two years I book in for a full physical medical check-up, especially now as I get older. My need for a more regular spiritual and relationship check-up is just as important. Reading Sifted has been a welcome recent check-up.

Wayne Cordeiro is founding pastor of New Hope Christian Fellowship in Honolulu and a network of 114+ other church plants in Hawaii and abroad. He shares out of his experience of almost four decades of ministry and a strong commitment to developing emerging leaders. Writing with input from innovative pastors Francis Chan (author of Crazy Love) and Larry Osborne (author of Sticky Teams), the result is a highly practical and personal ministry resource. Sifted is part of the Experiential Series, focused on resourcing the needs and diversity of church planters and leaders.

The book reads a bit like a microscope to examine three parts of a leader’s life, or a scalpel to cut back the garbage and get to the heart of three issues, with 4 chapters for each issue. It addresses the experience of leaders being sifted and growing stronger while they are being stretched. The theme of the book is the need for holistic leadership health and diligent personal care, without which ministry is likely not to be as fruitful or lasting as its potential.

First, Cordeiro invites an examination of the reader’s heart. Reading these chapters on trials, purpose, expectations and criticism, and seeking God out of weakness challenged me to ask, “What are my motives? Am I prepared to leave behind my preoccupation with success? Where does my urge to compare most appear? In what ways does God want to work in me before God works through me? What do I do with criticism targeted at me or my family? Why do I seek to meet too many people’s expectations and hate disappointing people?” Cordeiro says the two greatest days are the day you are born and the day you discover what you are born for. Our accountability to God is not to manically do lots of things, but to discern the unique things God calls us to and do that (regardless of whether our own personal drive or the unrealistic expectations of others suggests otherwise).

The second focus of Sifted is the home, not as a sphere separate to ministry but integrally related. I am not convinced by Cordeiro’s simplistic reprioritizing of God, Self, Spouse, Family, Ministry in that order. I prefer to think of God as at the centre of our lives, and our commitment to our other relationships needs to be worked out reflecting that. But he appeals not to sacrifice family and health on the altar of ministry; he offers an honest, tested, practical wisdom. Leaders need to know their limits, and they may push them sometimes but they need to be self-aware and know when they need to pull back and schedule rest. When the athlete is thirsty, it is too late—they should have been drinking to prevent thirst. Similarly in ministry, we need to develop a sustainable pace and build in space for sleeping enough, eating healthily, exercising regularly and pursuing life-giving relationships and hobbies. Sometimes the holiest thing a leader can do is to sleep if they are tired, play and have fun when they are stretched, or be attentive to spouse and children and to learn what is life-giving for them.

The final part zooms in on work. It is probably good not to start here, but appropriate to remind us that ministry involves focused and sometimes hard work. A key thing leaders need to learn, Cordeiro suggests, is a bias for action. A common substitute for the action of real ministry is the busyness of office and computer activity. These chapters warn against being distracted away from ministry to people, having a sense of entitlement, leaving everything to God, and being blind to our weaknesses, or being blind to our unguarded strengths and prosperity and how they can make us independent of God. A consistent theme of Sifted is that Jesus is enough, and sometimes we need to lose prosperity or ministry success to learn that.

Sifted is an excellent resource for self-care and the personal life of evangelists, church planters and others in ministry. I appreciated the personal sharing of the writers and the insights of their hard-earned lessons. Questions and space for journaling take the reader deeper and more inclined towards healthy responses in the posture of their hearts, the attentiveness to their home relationships, and their commitment to carefully focused action. Reading Sifted is easier and cheaper than a doctor and less painful and threatening than a heart attack, but it can serve as a sobering wake-up call about what is most important for Christian leaders.

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