

# Failure of Nerve

## TED Talk

Ralph Cunnington  
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The Bible is full of tragic stories about sin and the failure of leaders to act.

I think one of the most tragic is the account of Eli and his sons.

As sons of a priest, Hophni and Phineas, had the right to participate in the system of sacrifices. They were immensely privileged.

But we're told - 1 Samuel 2: 12 that they "were wicked men, who had no regard for the Lord". They fleeced the sacrifices of the meat before they'd even been offered and then had sex with the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting.

Eli rebuked them of course. But it was tame - toothless. They just let his protestations bounce off them – like water off a ducks back. "It's just fuddy duddy old Dad. When's he going to get with the programme and start appreciating what this priest's game is all about."

Eli should have acted. He should have removed his sons from the priestly work. That would have rescued the sacrificial system from their sin, it would have prioritised God's glory. And ultimately, it would have preserved their lives a little longer. But he didn't.

And the result. The ark gets captured, Hophni and Phineas get killed, and Eli falls off his chair in horror, breaking his neck and dying.

It's tragic!

And the cause – a failure of nerve.

One of the most helpful books I've read on leadership in recent years is by a little known author called Edwin Friedman. He's not a Christian. In fact, he was an ordained rabbi who worked as a family therapist in the United States.

And he died in 1996.

But he spoke - almost prophetically - about the crisis of leadership that we are now experiencing in the church and in in most other organisations.

In the introduction to his book, *Failure of Nerve*, Friedman laments what he describes as the "rampant sabotaging of leaders who try to stand tall amid the raging anxiety-storm of our time".

He says "its frustrating effect on leaders is the **same** no matter what their gender, race or age".

And here's the insight that I want to share with you today. He says, it's all down to emotional triangles.

Relationships which we assume to be two way relationships but which have actually become three way relationships

Let me give you a few examples to illustrate.

One from family life that those of us who are parents will be able to relate to. The acting up child. Now it's tempting to think that it's all about a bilateral relationship between us and the naughty child. But the reality is that it's made up of a whole load of triangles.

There's the triangle with our spouse. You see, our child will respond to us based upon their expectation of how the other parent will respond. And we will measure our response based on that as well.

If we've been arguing with our spouse and our child has witnessed it, that adds an extra layer of complexity to the triangle of relationships – either making them conflict averse, defensive, angry or a combination of them all.

And then there's the triangle we bring into the relationship with our child due to the relationship we had with our parents. Maybe they were harsh to us, or said things that are scarred onto our brains. That makes us draw back from discipline for fear of falling into the same trap as our parents. Do you see?

Triangles exist even on the international stage. We tend to think of the Ukraine conflict as simply being between Russia and Ukraine but in reality it's far more complicated than that. There is Ukraine's relationship with its allies in Europe and the US, with the European Union and NATO. And Russia's relationship with China and China's relationship with Taiwan and the West and so on. Those triangle relationships make it far more difficult for Russian and Ukraine to act than if they were the only two nations involved in the conflict.

You see that's what made Eli's situation so difficult. He was ordained a priest. He was called to be holy and to maintain the sacrificial system in accordance with God's Law. But his relationship with his sons triangled that. It created anxiety. But what will happen if I remove my sons? Will they ever speak to me again? Will they continue my line? And what will the community think? Eli lost his name, his holiness and ultimately his life.

And I fear the same thing is happening to many of us pastors today.

Let me give an example. There's a monthly outreach ministry in the church that's been running for 20 years. It was set up by a small team of five church members who are still avidly involved in it. One is your church treasurer. Another is an elderly man who always asks barbed questions at members' meetings.

Over the past five years, the ministry has slowly declined. For the past six months no unbelievers have attended at all. It's costing the church £5,000 per year and its taking up the time of five of your most committed and time rich church members. What do you do?

Well, if the relationship was just between you and the ministry, the answer is simple. You'd shut it down. Maybe in a phased way, certainly in accordance with the system for accountable governance and decision making you have in place; but you'd do it.

The problem is ... you're also thinking ... what will the treasurer do? Will he get upset and quit? Or will he go super conservative when setting the next budget just because he's upset with me? And what will the prickly member do at the next members meeting? Who will he talk to behind my back? And, will someone say I've been a bully, spiritually abusive? Triangles.

Do you know what causes stress and burnout? We often assume its overwork. But that's hard to square with the facts. Like:

- The fact that many people work much longer hours without burning out
- The fact that those who burn out have often worked much harder in the past than at the point of burnout.
- The fact that sabbaticals rarely prevent burnout. In fact, if anything they contribute to it because at the end of sabbatical pastors feel like they can't go back. Why?

Because stress and burnout are more about emotional and relational anxiety than about workload. Listen to Friedman:

"The stress on leaders primarily has to do with the extent to which the leader has been caught in a responsible position for the relationship of two others."

**They've been triangled.**

So what's the solution?

Friedman calls it self-differentiation. Sounds obscure doesn't it? But listen to his description.

"The way out is to make the two persons responsible for their own relationship, or the other person responsible for his or her problem, while all *still remain connected*."

It is remaining present while not assuming responsibility for holding everything together.

We might say: "It's stopping seeking to be the saviour while remaining present to point people (including ourselves) to the Saviour."

Friedman calls it a "non-anxious presence".

As a Rabbi he can describe it; he can even show us how it works. But he doesn't have the tools to help us find it.

Only the gospel can do that. Only the gospel enables us to enter anxious places and anxious organisations; only the gospel enables us to enter the anxious world of our own thoughts; and be a non-anxious presence.

Let me just tease out what that might look like in the outreach scenario I described.

It will mean us being present with the five people who started the ministry. Not avoiding them for fear of conflict; or being defensive or conflict averse. But hearing them out, exhaustively. Showing we have understood. Showing we appreciate their objections. And then making a decision.

We will not worry about whether the church treasurer will torpedo next year's budget; showering him with grace instead because that's what the gospel teaches us to do. And we will trust that our sovereign God will see us through financially.

We won't worry about the prickly questions at the next members meeting because we trust the Holy Spirit to give us the words and demeanour we need to answer calmly, clearly and kindly.

And we will not worry about our reputation because we know our identity is found in Christ. In him, we are washed, justified, sanctified and adopted as dearly loved children of God. Clothed with that identity – we can be a non-anxious presence in any situation. Union with Christ gives us the courage to lead, to hold our nerve and to seek first God's Kingdom and His righteousness.