

## Leading in Limbo Land

*Limbo – an uncertain, nebulous, in-between state*

Many pastors are finding this season of COVID-19 and its consequences difficult. There is so much uncertainty around, it is very hard to develop strong momentum in the church. There are small things to work on but progressing anything major seems near impossible. In particular, the lockdowns keep interfering with everything we try to do including prayer seasons and holiday clubs. It's hard progressing a significant vision when the future is uncertain and unclear, when we're waiting for the next lockdown or regulation. On top of that is the potential for conflict within the congregation over vaccinations and lockdowns. It's a challenging time.

For many pastors, it feels like they are leading in limbo land. Just waiting in this nebulous state until there is enough clarity to begin moving forward again. The limbo season easily leads to fatigue, depression, even frustration and anger.

I realise that churches outside the Southeast corner and Cairns regions may be less impacted by the COVID outbreaks and consequent frustrating lockdowns, and I know that some churches are powering ahead anyway. But I thought it may be helpful to say something to the many pastoral leaders who feel that they are in limbo land at the moment.

How do we lead well in limbo land? What biblical guidance do we have for navigating the times when God and circumstances place us in limbo and our dreams have to wait? Of course we're particularly interested in what the Bible says, so who in Scripture led through a limbo period successfully?

My first thought was of Jesus who waited at least 18 years (from 12 to 30) knowing his role and calling but waiting for the Father's nod to commence ministry. Jesus certainly understands the frustration of waiting.

I also thought about Paul in prison for over 4 years in Caesarea and Rome towards the end of his ministry with his intended mission severely curtailed. In limbo. Not sure of the length or outcome of his imprisonment. I thought of Jeremiah and his frustrating lack of impact over a lifetime. Limbo is not a new situation for God's leaders.

But the limbo situation I settled on was Moses in the wilderness. Once the Israelites rejected God's call to take Canaan, they pretty well hung around in the desert for the next 40 years until a new generation grew up with stronger faith and commitment. 40 years in limbo land. That takes the cake. Longer than our two or three years with COVID restrictions. Longer than Paul's four years as a prisoner. Longer than Jesus' 18 years waiting for God's time. 40 years in limbo. Now that's a challenge. Let's see what we can learn from Moses' experiences as the leader during this limbo season for Israel.

Of course, we need to be careful when we look at how biblical characters acted in particular situations. Like every other human leader, Moses was imperfect. He got lots of things wrong. He actually never made it out of the limbo period because of his failure. So I'm not saying let's copy Moses. We might end up copying the wrong bits. But let me draw out ten things that I think Scripture indicates Moses got right during this wilderness season. These may be helpful for us as many of us lead in somewhat similar circumstances.

1. *Expect miracles.* Limbo land doesn't mean that God stops working. Moses experienced many miracles as he led his people in the wilderness. They didn't conquer Canaan immediately as he would have liked, but every day God miraculously provided food for the Israelites. Moses knew that God would continue to work in power, even in the desert. Many times he prayed for a miracle and God answered. God is working powerfully in limbo land and you need to expect these miracles, and look for them and remember them and celebrate them. Just because some of your big visions may be in limbo, don't think that God has abandoned your church and ministry. He is very active if you look in the right places.
2. *Stay close to God.* You need him as your friend in limbo land. Every time the nation settled, Moses would pitch his "tent of meeting" (Ex. 33:7-11) where he would speak with God "face to face as one speaks with a friend." He needed God's close presence to support and sustain him. It's often draining and disappointing leading in limbo. Your friendship with God can make a huge difference. You need to know that God is in this with you.
3. *Share the load.* This is a vital leadership principle in any situation, but it is particularly important when big things are not happening, pressure is increasing and you feel that you as the leader should be doing something about it. Moses was over-stretched trying to resolve all his people's issues and it took his father-in-law to set him straight (Ex. 18). He needed a team. He needed to share the responsibility. His deep sense of obligation was burning him out and undermining his leadership. Go easy on yourself in limbo land. Look for others to share the load. Don't burn out from overwork in a time when your impact may be significantly limited. Not everything can be solved. Not by you anyway.
4. *Don't get ahead of God.* Early on, God actually gave Moses the opportunity to lead the people into Canaan with his angels for protection, but without his presence (Ex. 33:1-3). I'm not sure what that would have looked like, but God offered it as a possibility. Moses completely rejected God's invitation. They were doing it with God or they were not doing it at all. This decision was costly for Moses. It led to 40 years in the wilderness with these stiff-necked people until God was ready to move into Canaan with a new generation. In the limbo season, it's attractive to start pursuing ways forward that might end the limbo. If you think you know the way forward, just be sure that it is God and not fear or ambition that is driving you. You don't want to move ahead without God's presence. In the end, Moses missed out on Canaan because he acted on his own in frustration (Ex. 20:1-13). Be patient. Don't get frustrated. Obey and wait.
5. *Expect criticism.* Limbo is a difficult time for everyone. It easily leads to navel-gazing, blaming and criticising. It's more difficult for criticisms to gain a hearing when a church is on the move, but when momentum is lost, lots of people think they know what the problem is and what should be done. And much of this murmuring will be aimed at the leader. Moses copped a constant barrage of criticism. The recurrent criticisms were "things were much better in the past – let's go back" (mentioned 7 times), "things should be much better now – it's all your (or God's) fault" (10 times), and "you need bringing down a peg" (twice by leaders). None of these were true, but they had plenty of support. I hope you fare better than Moses, but criticism will increase in limbo land. That's okay. The critics are broken people like you and God will defend you.
6. *Outlast the opposition.* In limbo land, the opposition comes from both without (the difficult challenges of the situation) and within (the challenges of struggling, complaining people). Moses was initially reluctant to take on the leadership role, but when he committed, he stuck to his guns and persevered. He faced a myriad of difficulties but didn't waver. Well actually he wavered (e.g. Num. 11:10-15), but never caved. He kept leading until God said enough. By all

means take a break when you need it. I notice that quite a few pastors are taking long service leave at the moment. Great, that's what it's for. But stay true to your calling. Many years ago I was talking to a Christian leader about a time of great difficulty and criticism that he had faced in his leadership. I asked him how he coped with it. His response was: "I was determined to outlast it." And he did. With God's help, you will outlast this limbo season.

7. *Defend your people in prayer.* Yes some are slack. Some are weak. Some are difficult. Some are consumers. Some whinge and complain. Some are unfaithful to God. The weakness of God's people drove Moses to pray on their behalf. Even when God had had enough and told Moses that he would wipe them out and start again with Moses' family (Num. 14:10-12), Moses pleaded for God's forgiveness on their behalf. He kept standing in the breach for them. The people you lead desperately need your care and prayer at this time. Many are finding it difficult. It's time to be a "priest," looking after them spiritually.
8. *Let God shape you.* God uses limbo land to test and shape a leader's character. When you can't hide behind your programs and successes and winning ways, what are you really like? More grumpy? More fearful? More defensive? More anxious? More demanding? Or is a deeper peace, humility and reliance on God emerging as God shapes you? I love the comment in brackets in Num. 12:3, "Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth." (I presume Moses didn't write this about himself.) The huge challenges and frustrations and disappointments of limbo land just made Moses more humble and dependent on God. It can do that for you too. What a blessing.
9. *Express your frustrations carefully.* Although he was incredibly humble, Moses still got frustrated by the constant setbacks in limbo land, particularly those caused by the people he led. At his lowest point he told God, "What have I done to displease you that you put the burden of all these people on me... I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how you are going to treat me, please go ahead and kill me" (Num. 11:11-15). Now that's a frustrated leader! But notice that all this comes out in his relationship with God not with his people. When his frustration boiled over in public and he hit the rock instead of speaking to it (Num. 20:1-13), God's response was: "Because you did not trust me enough to honour me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them." It was a tough call by God, but wrongly expressed frustrations always carry a cost.
10. *Hold on to God's promises.* In limbo land, God doesn't abandon his promises. But he may put them on hold while he does further preparation. Moses never lost sight of God's promises and his own role in preparing his people for the challenges and blessing that lay ahead. As a new generation of Israelites emerged in the wilderness, they were infused with Moses' vision of a new land. They were ready to step out in faith. God's promises still stand. They will be fulfilled. It may just take a little longer than we hoped, but God is true to his word. Your church must understand that. It needs a leader in limbo land that will inspire people to believe in God's promises and hope for the future.

I'm sure there are many other lessons we could draw from Moses' leadership in limbo land, but this is a start. Moses' leadership points towards Jesus, the ultimate shepherd leader who teaches and enables us to obey and serve in the most difficult circumstances.

Limbo land is a time of testing, humbling, checking, purifying, trusting and believing. It's not an accident or setback. It's an essential step in God's powerful work. God is on the move. Be patient and don't be discouraged.