

FOREWORD BY JARED C. WILSON

PASTOR,
JESUS IS
ENOUGH

HOPE FOR THE WEARY, THE BURNED OUT, & THE BROKEN



JEREMY WRITEBOL

PASTOR,
JESUS IS
ENOUGH

HOPE FOR THE WEARY, THE BURNED OUT, & THE BROKEN

JEREMY WRITEBOL

FOREWORD BY JARED C. WILSON



LEXHAM PRESS



Pastor, Jesus Is Enough: Hope for the Weary, the Burned Out, and the Broken

Copyright 2023 Jeremy Writebol

Lexham Press, 1313 Commercial St., Bellingham, WA 98225

LexhamPress.com

You may use brief quotations from this resource in presentations, articles, and books. For all other uses, please write Lexham Press for permission. Email us at permissions@lexhampress.com.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are the author's own translation or are from the *ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®)*, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked (CSB) are from The Christian Standard Bible. Copyright © 2017 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission. Christian Standard Bible®, and CSB® are federally registered trademarks of Holman Bible Publishers, all rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked (NASB) are from the New American Standard Bible®. Copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Print ISBN 9781683596738

Digital ISBN 9781683596745

Library of Congress Control Number 2022945984

Lexham Editorial: Todd Hains, Jeff Reimer, Allie Boman, Mandi Newell, Jessi Strong

Cover Design: Brittany Schrock

Typesetting: Justin Marr

CONTENTS

FOREWORD	XII
PRAYER FOR REST IN JESUS	XVI
CHAPTER ONE	
<i>Pastor, You Belong to Jesus</i>	1
CHAPTER TWO	
<i>Pastors Love Jesus the Most</i>	9
CHAPTER THREE	
<i>Pastors Suffer</i>	29
CHAPTER FOUR	
<i>Pastors Teach and Tell the Truth</i>	45
CHAPTER FIVE	
<i>Pastors Become Like Jesus</i>	63
CHAPTER SIX	
<i>Pastors Abide in Jesus</i>	85
CHAPTER SEVEN	
<i>Pastors Find Their Value in Jesus</i>	101
CHAPTER EIGHT	
<i>Pastors Repent</i>	119
CHAPTER NINE	
<i>Pastor, Jesus Is Enough</i>	137
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	150
ENDNOTES	154
WORKS CITED	160
SCRIPTURE INDEX	164

FOREWORD

Pastoring churches is a weighty thing. It can also be an anxious thing. It is telling that in 2 Corinthians 11, after the apostle Paul has torn through a litany of afflictions and hardships that amount to his suffering for Christ—things like beatings and whippings, shipwrecks and assassination attempts, robbers and wild animals, starvation and hypothermia—he adds at the end of that list: “And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches” (v. 28).

I would add, just as a bit of applicational commentary, that *on top of all that* there is the frequent reality that a pastor must experience the daily pressure of this anxiety for the church *alone*. Or, at least, it often feels that way.

In 2021, we saw the first significant spike in years in the number of pastors who reported they were thinking about quitting. Over the last few years, the rank politicization of evangelicalism, the justice debates, the increasing balkanization among evangelical sub-cultures, and of course the coronavirus pandemic have all seemed to make shepherding even more weighty than it already was. I fear that in into the future, we’ll begin to see more and more of our precious pastors crack under the weight of their anxiety for the church. What can be done?

Well, in 2 Corinthians 11:30–33, Paul directs us to embrace our weakness and rely on the rescuing hand of God. And this is exactly where Jeremy Writebol takes you in this book. Jeremy is not going to help you pretend your problems aren’t real. He’s not going to show you how to fake it until you make it. He’s not going to puff you up with superficial inspiration that won’t address the

real challenges you face, the real burdens you bear, or the real power you have available to you. No, in *Pastor, Jesus Is Enough*, he is bluntly honest about that pressure, about that anxiety, about the fact that pastoring often *hurts*. But he also relentlessly points you to your only hope—the affectionate grace of Jesus, more abundant than all our afflictions.

Let Jeremy pastor you through these pages. Because shepherds need shepherds who have already walked the dark and winding path before them and can show them the way, who can in effect be a light. Whether you feel the weight of the last few years on your shoulders and are on the verge of packing it in, or whether you are just plodding through the regular pressure of anxiety for your church and need the encouragement of the gospel, you have a trustworthy friend in your hand.

Jared C. Wilson,
Kansas City, Missouri

PRAYER FOR
REST IN JESUS

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup;
you hold my lot.

The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance.

Psalm 16:5–6

For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol,
or let your holy one see corruption.

You make known to me the path of life;

in your presence there is fullness of joy;

at your right hand are pleasures forevermore. *Psalm 16:10–11*

Almighty God, you have revealed your Son to us and blessed us through him. Grant that we may rest settled in him, never turning here or there, but as we entrust ourselves to his care be so satisfied with his all-sufficiency as our king and priest and mediator. Grant this so that among the many changes of this world our hearts may be fixed where true joys are found. By your mercy grant that we may offer ourselves as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to you. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.¹

“JOHN TO THE seven churches that are in Asia:

“Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.

“To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.

“‘I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God, ‘who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.’

“When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, ‘Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.’”

REVELATION 1:4-8, 17-18

CHAPTER ONE

PASTOR,
YOU BELONG
TO JESUS

I t's exhausting, trying to be enough.

As our worship team opened our gathering with a welcome, my heart sank. The room was unusually quiet. Normally at least half the seats would be filled at the beginning of the service, with stragglers and those persistently behind showing up to fill the room by the time we had begun to sing the second or third song. But that dynamic had changed. On this particular Sunday there were maybe ten people in the room. The room that had been so full before was so, so silent.

I looked around wondering whether anyone else would show up. My heart hoped. A sea of troubles had crashed down on our congregation and on me as the pastor. I was defeated. Certainly, I had done my best to uphold the church. I wanted to see it be vibrant in its witness and work. I was concerned that the church be faithful in obedience to the Word of God, vital in our love for each other and our neighbors, and—more than anything—be the Christ-centered body of grace that our world desperately needed. Following the lead of my pastoral mentors, I wanted to be patient where there was disagreement, careful and wise in decision-making that would serve the weak and weary. Where there was a need for correction and discipline in the church, I tried to wield the sword of the Spirit as a physician's scalpel, not a butcher's cleaver. And yet, I couldn't be enough.

When a few in the church took issue with some statements of solidarity and compassion with hurting racial minorities in our community over police brutality, the charges for the explosion were set. As I navigated the complaints and criticism alongside fellow elders of my church, we sought to address the hearts of these individuals who had so vehemently objected. Instead of being open to correction they revolted and took a significant number of attenders in the church with them. The church was cut in half.

On that first Sunday after I looked around the room, I saw how many people were absent, and my heart broke. I tried so hard to hold it all together. I had lived my life trying to be a faithful, wise, and compassionate pastor. I gave every effort to lead well. And it was all gone. For five years I had seen the trajectory of the church move upward in all the “measurable categories.” Attendance grew every year. We were on the brink of making plans for a building expansion or even relocation to a larger facility. Baptisms and conversions were frequent, membership was increasing, giving was abounding, leaders were multiplying, small groups growing, staff was being hired. All the best stuff of ministry was taking place. And within fewer than six months all the victories seemed to be wiped out. Some remained, but what had become of my beautiful church?

The psalmist’s words, “Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain,” echoed in my mind (Ps 127:1). Had I built in vain? Had I preached, served, disciplined, prayed with, blessed, encouraged all for nothing? I compared myself to the couple John Piper warned about who wasted their lives collecting seashells.² At least they had the seashells. I had the remnant of a relationally bombed-out church. Shame washed over me because I was the leader. This wasn’t supposed to happen under my watch. I *wasn’t* enough.

Pastor, you aren’t enough either.

I don’t say that to be demeaning or to discount your accomplishments or faithfulness in ministry. I’m not trying to compare us, as if to say, “I couldn’t be enough, so why in the world would you think you could be?” I’m trying to express the truth the Bible often draws out about how sufficient we are for the calling and work of ministry. Even the apostle Paul asked, “Who is sufficient for these things?” (2 Cor 2:16). And he was the apostle Paul. So we shouldn’t think we are the exception. We aren’t enough. We were never meant to be.

Our frustrations with this reality boil over from our own ambitions and perceptions and even definitions of what success in ministry should be. We want to pastor and lead well, so that

the church will grow, and the measurable stuff of ministry will bloom all around us. Any setback, deficiency, or call for assistance makes us vulnerable to the charge of failure. We're like a small child wanting to be independent, shouting at their parent, "I can do it!"

I am not enough. You are not enough. Gratefully, our Savior Jesus, whom we serve, knows this. Here's how I know.

In 2018 the multisite church that I pastor began going through a significant leadership transition. Our senior pastor of over twenty-five years had announced his intentions to transition out of leadership, and the church would begin looking for his successor. As part of the transition strategy, Pastor Doug wanted to ensure that our church would avoid organizational drift away from our foundations both in mission and in method. Resources on mission drift were secured and supplied to all the staff and elders. As part of the team that identifies and shapes what each of our congregations would be hearing on Sunday mornings in the pulpit, I suggested a study on Revelation 2–3 and Jesus' letters to the churches. In my mind each of these letters identified a specific caution that Jesus would give to the churches and a way forward for them. It was a perfect series to call us to greater fidelity as a church and faithfulness in avoiding moral, theological, and methodological drift. However, I failed to account for one thing in my recollection of the content of Revelation 2–3: the pastors.

Where I had thought of each of these letters as an indictment against the church (mostly) and a solution (repentance) to fix what ailed them, I failed to see that there was a person looming large over the churches speaking directly to the leaders. His words, in fact, were the content of the letters to each church, but he wasn't speaking as a detached or distant CEO giving pragmatic instruction on how to fix a branch or two of the spiritual franchises. And it wasn't Jesus just tossing out leadership memos

to these congregations about how to do better and try harder. He was writing to pastors. Real leaders, real individuals who were given the charge to lead local congregations in actual local communities. These letters are not Jesus' take on *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*.

When I saw the seven letters (and the entire book of Revelation for that matter) in this light, I realized Jesus was drawing close to suffering, insufficient, floundering pastors and churches. In the magnificence of his all-surpassing power and authority, he stands near pastors and churches to remind them of his ultimate victory over the cosmic powers that would undo them. In the triumph of the resurrection, he draws near as the “faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead and the ruler of the kings of the earth” (Rev 1:5 CSB). When he draws near to the apostle John on Patmos in Revelation 1, he appears in radiant glory. There is no question the vision of the resurrected, vindicated, glorified Jesus was to demonstrate his supreme and matchless authority over all contenders. If you're on the opposing side of his glory, you should be terrified. But if you're a “brother and partner in the affliction, kingdom, and endurance that are in Jesus,” then Jesus showing up in glory for you is a welcome sight (Rev 1:9 CSB). He's truly the older brother coming to the rescue of his younger siblings being abused by a cowardly bully. In a cosmic sense, thinking about the universal church, that's really comforting. But there's a locality to this vision as well; don't miss it.

Seven cities are mentioned. Seven communities are identified as the places where Jesus' letter will land. John is commanded to “write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches” (Rev 1:11). While the number seven symbolizes the universal scope of this letter for all the churches, we can't look past the specific referents in Jesus' command to John. He has seven specific—in space and time—communities and churches in view. He shows up to say something to Ephesus and Smyrna and Pergamum and

Thyatira and Sardis and Philadelphia and Laodicea. He shows up to be something for these churches. He wants them to see that he is enough.

One element of the glorious visage of Jesus is described as a “mystery” that needs further explanation. John sees seven stars and seven golden lampstands. Jesus holds the seven stars in his right hand. He stands amid the seven lampstands. And without a point of reference, we’re left to guess at what the significance of this placement is. Thankfully we’re not left to speculate.

Jesus explains the mystery in this way: “The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches” (Rev 1:20). Jesus stands in the midst of the churches; he holds the pastors in his right hand. Now it might seem a stretch to some to interpret these “angels” as pastors, but each of the following seven letters to specific local churches is written to the “angel” of that local church. If the stars or angels are not human individuals, it reduces the particular impact of how Jesus’ glory is good news for specific communities and specific pastors in the midst of a hostile cultural context. I’m of the opinion (thankfully with others, notably Peter Leithart³) that Jesus isn’t just speaking to some guardian angel or that the stars and angels are a spiritualized reference to the church. Plainly, the angel is a messenger, a pastor.

Jesus makes it plain where his attention is focused. He cares for his church. He’s standing in the center of his people. Jesus cares for his pastors. They are held in his right hand. The letters are personal addresses from Jesus to these pastors about who he is and who they are. Underpinning every letter is the fact that the pastors are held in the dominant hand of authority and care of Jesus Christ himself. He begins each address confronting the pastors with a specific facet of his identity, directly pointed to the need and lack of “enoughness” that each pastor has. These letters are about how Jesus is enough for each of them, in their particular needs.

Make no mistake: Jesus will say hard words. He will confront sin and apathy. Jesus will get in the face of one or two and tell them they make him sick. He applies a healing word to the wounds of two pastors who are down on the mat after taking a beating from the enemy. Their weakness doesn't repel Jesus. He doesn't give up on any one of them.

He won't give up on you either. In fact, like Jesus' victorious promise to them, Jesus' expectation is that you will be victorious too. Yes: you, pastor. He's enough to see us home to the end. Each letter concludes with a promise and motivation to endure and press on trusting him. "To the one who conquers" (Rev 2:7) is an invitation to remember that we belong to Jesus and, "as I also conquered," so he will see to our victory as well (Rev 3:21).

These seven letters are love letters from Jesus to pastors, and the more I think about it, the more that seems right. Certainly, they aren't syrupy and sappy romantic letters, but they are nonetheless evidences of Jesus' care and concern for the pastors who lead his church. The introduction to the book of Revelation reminds us that it is from "him who loves *us* and has freed *us* from our sins by his blood" (Rev 1:5). These letters are the very Word of God for pastors today, like me and you, striving to be enough and yet forgetting to remember that we have a Savior who is absolutely enough. And you, pastor, belong to him!

So, because Jesus is enough, and because pastors belong to him, "let anyone who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says" Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22 CSB).

TO THE ANGEL of the church in Ephesus write: “The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.

“I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake, and you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”

REVELATION 2:1-7

CHAPTER TWO

PASTORS
LOVE JESUS
THE MOST

“Ministry is a mistress.”

Those words aren't only said by women who experience the neglect of being a pastor's wife while her husband in ministry is never home, always giving preference, energy, and time to the church, the staff, and those who have an “immediate need.” The statement doesn't come exclusively from children who fail to see their father: who lose birthdays, vacations, and sports games to a dad who only has time for counseling the masses of his congregation, comforting the grieving in his flock, and caring about an invisible kingdom he's trying to build more than a family he was entrusted to serve.

In the quiet places of our hearts, many pastors will also say, “Ministry is a mistress.” She's intoxicating, demanding, driving, exhilarating, unbearable, and unignorable. Ministry demands our best; it requires our peak focus and attention. We're inclined to think ministry, if it is going to bear fruit, is not a half-hearted weekend hobby we can give occasional attention to. We labor to preach excellent sermons, make disciples, comfort the hurting, encourage the faithful, build up the weak. And we like it! There is an adrenaline rush that kicks in when we are needed. Ministry demands may inconvenience our family, but that's part of the call, right? We get a prize in heaven for our sacrifices. We are tempted to believe the more we give up the greater our reward. And if we're honest, on most days, we actually love the whistle call of the saints demanding our attention.

Ministry is a mistress.

Would Jesus think so too? Could it be the one who called us to shepherd his people and share his gospel might be a little jealous of our affections towards his bride?

There's a knot I have to untangle when I think about the pastor's wandering affections and the “ministry mistress.” On one hand, there are (usually) obvious signs when a pastor is in a ministry affair

with his church. He's frantic. His pace is overwhelming. There is more and more and more and more he is trying to do for the kingdom of God. Ministry is an unquenchable fire that requires nearly everything from him. Early mornings, late nights, meeting to meeting to meeting defines his work. There is no quiet, no peace, no rest in his life. Taking a day off each week or using all his vacation time is sacrificed on the altar of "too much to do."

But in my experience, the pastor who is treating his church as a mistress is usually doing good work. He's not necessarily frayed at the edges trying to hold it all together. The pastor has found a way to be effective and successful in ministry and this has produced, from the outside, a healthy, sound, growing ministry. If he has any charisma or personal attractiveness, then people are all the more drawn to his work, which amplifies the problem. The pastor loves the ministry, the church wants his ministry, and an affair of the heart occurs.

When it comes down to it, Jesus isn't jealous of "the other man" trying to seduce his bride away from him. He's jealous to have the affections of the pastor himself. The pastor has a problem of disordered love, directing his heart and affections to another lover and away from the first love. Ministry, especially in its successes and victories, can seduce a pastor away from a true love for Christ and replace that love with a lesser love for ministry, approval, being needed, or a hundred other substitutes, so that what he does is to "love what it is wrong to love, or fail to love what should be loved, or love too much what should be loved less (or love too little what should be loved more)."⁴

THE ONE WHO HOLDS AND STANDS

In each Revelation letter sent to his pastors, Jesus gives them a specific view of himself. Each situation (or context) yields a distinct and specific self-revelation of God, a God who is transcendent over all and yet intimately involved in each context. Jesus didn't just create the church and then step back and let her get on with her mission apart from his presence and sovereign leadership. Jesus

wants his pastors and churches to know him and experience his brilliance for his church.

Because of the repetition that occurs in the text from the end of chapter 1 to the first verse of chapter 2 we might be quick to skim over Jesus' presentation of himself. We've heard the line before, and its explanation, and we want to get on with what Jesus is going to say about the church in Ephesus. But the words Jesus says to Ephesus about who he is are not to be quickly passed over just because we've already heard them. The pastor at Ephesus needs to see Jesus in this way. The things that Jesus will address in the body of the letter have at their head a solution in who Jesus is. To pass over this is to miss the very remedy Jesus is offering to the pastor whose loves have become disordered.

The word to the pastor of the church in Ephesus comes from "him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands" (Rev 2:1). Jesus is present in Ephesus. He's "intimately concerned with them," and his concern stems from the issues he is seeing in the church and more directly, in the very heart of the pastor.⁵

This pastor needs to see clearly that Jesus *walks among* the seven golden lampstands. He's not passively hovering on the fringes. He's active and busy in the churches. Not only is Jesus active in his church, but he also *holds* the stars in his right hand. More than just having them, the verb here reflects that Jesus is *grasping* his pastors in his hand. They aren't just there, they are held there. Again, it's an active sense of Jesus for his church, with his church, protecting his pastors and people. This pastor is being held securely in the hands of Jesus, as Jesus acts and works in his church.

Why is this vision of Jesus so important to start with? Because we often forget where he is and where we are. We go searching for approval and success in ministry, and our hearts are so disordered with love for the ministry that we forget the very one our ministry is to be all about. We're ignorant of the fact that Jesus is here in our church, and we're right there in his hand, and he is enough. But is that enough?

Jesus is this way for each of his pastors. He walks in your church, which is to say he is present in and among his people in active ways. We don't have to conjure up his presence to get something to happen. Jesus strides among his people. Jesus grasps you in his hand. Pastor, in Christ you are secure, protected, loved. Nothing is going to release you from his hand. You belong to Jesus and are held by Jesus. The best days may be ahead, the worst days may come, but Jesus has you right there in his hand.

ROTTEN RÉSUMÉS

If we're honest, we want our churches to be successful. Actually, if we are *human* we want our churches to be successful. We want our churches to grow both numerically and spiritually. We want to see a trajectory of life transformation and cultural impact from the result of the hours and hours of our labors. The successful pastor has to be a leader who actually has someone to pastor. And usually the more people to pastor, the more secure the ministry, the more established the reputation, the more successful the pastor.

The problem of the successful pastor or the successful church is the problem of disordered loves. In doing well as a pastor, or leading a flourishing church, we can find ourselves in the grip of loving the wrong things. Over the years of faithful, constant ministry, the affections of our hearts can shift from loving Jesus to loving the work. We can move from being passionately devoted to and in love with Jesus to being passionately devoted to and in love with our own ministries. The subtle shift that takes place is a shift, not of our affections, but in the object of our affections.

I imagine this is what happened with the church in Ephesus that we read about in Revelation 2:1–7. They were so focused on being a good church that their affections shifted from the Lord of the church to the work of the church itself.

There's no need to spend a lot of time telling you about Ephesus as a city or a church. When you look at the list of names of the leaders that pastored in Ephesus you don't have to guess whether they were a well-led, well-trained church. Leaders like Apollos,