

Doug Smith ([00:08](#)):

Hey, leader, and welcome to another episode of the L3 Leadership Podcast, where we are obsessed with helping you grow to your maximum potential and to maximize the impact of your leadership. My name is Doug Smith, and I am your host, and today's episode is brought to you by my friends at Beratung Advisors. We're also recording this live from the new return.com studio. If you're new to the podcast, welcome. I'm so glad that you're here, and I hope that you enjoy our content and become a subscriber. Know that you can also watch all of our episodes over on our YouTube channel as well. So make sure you're subscribed there. And as always, if you've been listening to the podcast for a while and it's impacted your life, it would mean the world to me if you would leave us a rating and review on Apple Podcast or Spotify, or whatever app you're listening to podcast through that really does help us to grow our audience and reach more leaders.

Doug Smith ([00:47](#)):

So thank you in advance for that. Well leader. In today's episode, you're gonna hear my conversation with my friend and mentor, John Stalwart. John was on the podcast way back in the day, all the way back in episode number nine. And since then, I've gone through one of his executive coaching programs and have had him personally coach me for a year. And it just so happened that it was during the darkest year of my life. I've sh I've been very open about that on the podcast. Um, but in that dark season, John made a very significant impact in my life, and it's actually the reason I wanted to do this episode. We talk a lot about the role of pain in a leader's life, and John wrote an entire book about this, which we talk about. I really encourage you to get it in. So I think if you're in the middle of a season of pain or if you've been through painful seasons, I think you're gonna get a lot out of this conversation. If you're unfamiliar with John, let me just tell you a little bit about 'em. John is a bestselling author, speaker, and acclaimed authority in the field of leadership development. His focus is helping individuals, organizations, and communities worldwide to embrace and implement the principles of serving leadership. And, uh, again, John is a content machine, and so if you enjoy this conversation, really encourage you to connect with him again. He's just made such a huge impact in my life and I'm very grateful for him. But before we dive into the conversation, just a few announcements.

Doug Smith ([01:58](#)):

This episode of the L3 Leadership Podcast is sponsored by Beratung Advisors. The financial advisors at BeratungAdvisors help educate and empower clients to make informed financial decisions. You can find out how Beratung Advisors can help you develop a customized financial plan for your financial future by visiting their website [Beratungadvisors.com](#). That's B E R A T U N G advisors.com. Securities and investment products and services offered through LPL Financial member FINRA and SIPC, Beratung Advisors, LPL Financial and L3Leadership are separate entities. I also wanna thank our sponsor, Henne Jewelers. They're a jeweler owned by my friend and mentor, John Henne. And my wife Laura and I got our engagement and wedding rings through Henne Jewelers and had an incredible experience. And not only do they have a great jewelry, but they also invest in people. In fact, for every couple that comes in engaged, they give them a book to help them prepare for marriage, and we just love that.

Doug Smith ([02:48](#)):

So if you're in need of a good jeweler, check out [hennejewelers.com](#). And I also want to thank our new sponsor, return.com and leader. Let me just ask you this. Have you ever had an interest in investing in real estate? Well, now for as little as \$500, you can become a commercial real estate investor. Just visit [return.com](#) to learn more. That's R E I T U R N.com. Investing involves risk. Please consult a return

offering circular if you're interested in investing. And with all that being said, let's dive right in. Here's my conversation with John Stahl-Wert.

Doug Smith ([03:22](#)):

Well, John Stahl Wert, welcome to the L3 Leadership Podcast. Uh, your second time guest, we were just talking, you were actually the seventh episode, uh, at that time, the Learning to Lead podcast. I still remember being afraid to ask you for the interview. I still remember coming to your office and, uh, and man, it was just such a joy and it's been a pleasure to get to know you over the last decade. And, uh, we'll get into this. But you've been extremely influential in my life, especially when a few years ago I went through a really dark season. Uh, your coaching was really, and your voice in my life was really significant at that time. So I wanna thank you, uh, for everything you've imparted to me throughout my leadership journey. And I know I'm just one of hundreds of thousands of leaders that you've added value to over the course of your journey. So, just wanted to start by saying thank you and welcome.

John Stahl-Wert ([04:06](#)):

Thank you very much, Doug. Um, it's been 11 years since we did that podcast, and I think you and I have known each other for 15. And I think you know that I am a big fan of the way you put yourself out there in service to other people. And it's a real honor to join you on this podcast. So thank you for having me.

Doug Smith ([04:25](#)):

Yeah. Well, I wanna start with actually talking about, uh, a book that when I was going through a dark season, I'll hold it up here. Uh, for those listening, if you've been along for the journey, I had a, what I would call a mental breakdown in the fall of 2020. And John, uh, runs an organization called The Center for Serving Leadership. And they have a, a collaborative cohort program, uh, that I got to go through. And it was extremely beneficial. And I remember as a part of the program, you actually get one-on-one coaching with John, and I was meeting with him and he just said, you have to read this book. Uh, I think it'll really help you. And I actually had no idea what the book was about. I'm like, Hey, it's, it's probably another leadership book, servant leadership. I feel like I get that.

Doug Smith ([05:04](#)):

And the, the actual content of the book shocked me. It was all about actually dealing with, with trouble and with pain and how that leads to growth. And little did I know it, you know, I can only say this now looking back, but that's exactly what I was in the middle with. And, uh, it was so difficult. And so I'm, I'm so passionate about this message, John. So I'll just leave this really open-ended at first, and then we can dive into some of the practical content. But you wrote this book *Grow Up*. Why did you write this? And, and really what do you want leaders to get out of it?

John Stahl-Wert ([05:31](#)):

Well, so I've been very close to a lot of leaders for a long, long time. And one of the things that it does not take a rocket science to observe if you hang out with owners and leaders and chiefs, is that their own pain, their own trouble, uh, their own immaturity can wreak havoc in their organization, in their church, in their community, in their city, in their nation. And it just keeps going up in the world. And though I've spent most of my time for 30 years working at Center for Serving Leadership and in other institutions helping grow leadership skill, I was always, um, aiming for a time when I could address some things that I've learned about what we should do with our face plants. You know, when we fall flat on

our face or when everything comes undone, or what we thought was the life we wanted spills and we tumble out, what should we do with that if we wanna be improved by it?

John Stahl-Wert ([06:32](#)):

And, um, you know, I was observant from boyhood. Uh, my eyes worked when I was even very small. And, um, I noticed as a young boy and as a teenager, and ever since that some human beings become more beautiful through everything they suffer and everything they endure. And you wanna be with them. And some human beings become ugly through what they have suffered. And you don't want to be with them. And so, even when I was young, I thought I, uh, I want to take the route of, um, of growing and there is a direct relationship between the, the worst things that happen to us, what we do about them, how we re we res, how we respond to them, and what happens to us over time in terms of our heart, our openness, our trust, um, our joy, our sense of life's wonder, our desire to be with people and to be for people. There's a direct relationship. And so I wrote this book ultimately, finally to unpack what I've been watching for. Um, I, I can say that I have been watching this for about 58 years. I'm 64. Wow. And I had some experiences when I was five six that woke me up, uh, not pleasant experiences and caused me to begin to realize what's underneath, um, you know, underneath the cover or behind the curtain in the human life. And so this book is a long time coming.

Doug Smith ([08:12](#)):

Yeah. Well, this, this book and this message are so necessary and part of the process, I just wanna walk through some of this, the process that you take leaders through in the book. The first step of the process, I would say is you say that leaders have to recognize that I'm not exempt from trouble and this, that, that statement alone. Now, I wouldn't have said this, but you know, when I got saved and gave my life to Christ at 17, my life transformed completely. It was beautiful. And I don't, I wanna say <laugh>, I don't wanna say that I believe my life would always be up until the right, but my experience was, I'm very positive. Everything was going really great for a really long time until I had that mental breakdown. Um, and I think in processing that I, I, it was funny, I'm just trying to give context for your answer.

Doug Smith ([08:53](#)):

Um, I was interviewing a, a leader, uh, two leaders actually, but the wife of the, the woman that I was interviewing had become deaf when she was 30. Hmm. And, and that, and she was, she was raised to believe that you would never suffer. Nothing bad will ever happen to you. And so when that happened, she really, really questioned God. She questioned everything. She was angry at God, uh, and ended up, God, just like your book says, God ended up doing something beautiful through that experience. But what she said through that, she said, uh, we are setting up the next generation for so much harm when we don't teach them a proper theology of suffering. Yeah. Because if they think that suffering will never come, when it does, they automatically run away and, and basically abandon God in their life. And so, can you just talk to us about this concept and why it's so important for leaders to realize they're not exempt from trouble?

John Stahl-Wert ([09:39](#)):

Well, uh, at a simple level, because all of us have a certain notion that once we figure something out, um, life will go up into the right. And or we have a notion that the smarter people have figured things out and their life is going up into the right. One of those two, all of us, we, we either think, if I could just learn, if I could just understand if I could just reach this hurdle or get over that threshold, or maybe finish this degree or find that life made, or get this kind of job, whatever it is, we have this idea that

between me and the beginning of life as it's supposed to be, trouble free is a step or two, maybe I don't even know what it is, but I need to figure it out. Or we think that, um, you know, when when they handed out the, the deck of cards, they, they left us short of a, of a full hand, but other people that we observe are trouble free.

John Stahl-Wert ([10:38](#)):

Cuz you know, externally, uh, people can look pretty good. You know, you say, how you doing? And they say, I'm doing good, and they're actually not doing good. And so simply stated, I think everybody has that notion, and it's a very damaging notion because as soon as we fail or fall or get betrayed, um, and you name it, I mean, the list of things that happen to human beings is quite large. As soon as that happens, then it raises serious questions about whether we're qualified, um, you know, take up space. And, uh, so that's at a very simple level. And, um, but, um, more deeply we know from scripture that trouble is stitched in. And Jesus said, in this world, you will have trouble. So what are we thinking? We're not gonna have trouble. And he said, we're gonna have trouble. And he had trouble.

John Stahl-Wert ([11:30](#)):

And, you know, he was the best one that there was. Uh, little sidebar, Doug. Um, you're holding a copy of the book called Grow Up. It's a sequel, uh, to the global book called The Serving Leader, the one that really opened up the pathway of my vocation around the world. And it picks up the same characters in the serving leader, the, the same main character. And, um, I have conclusively decided to do something. I think that's probably ridiculous from a marketing standpoint and retitle that book The Suffering Leader. Hmm. And so we have the Serving Leader, which I highly recommend. We be someone who goes out into the world every day asking, what can I do that's good for someone else, customer, friend, family, neighbor? What can I do that would be useful in the world? That is a wonderful foundation for living and for value creation?

John Stahl-Wert ([12:32](#)):

So we have the Serving leader, and then we have the Suffering leader, uh, as the twin. And, um, backstory to this, it was 2003, I was sitting in the, um, in the offices of our publisher, Barrett Kohler in San Francisco. And Ken Blanchard was sitting there and, uh, we were, we were gathered around the, the book that we were all holding. And the publisher, uh, Steve Pante was there and feeling good to put it very mildly. And, uh, at a certain point when things, um, calmed down a little bit, I said, now I want to write the sequel. And, um, these guys all looked over me at me like I, I had grown an extra eye. And, um, somebody said, what's Sequel <laugh>? I said, the sequel about how the main character in the serving leader ventures out into his new work of being a serving leader and all hell breaks loose and what he has to go through to actually grow up. Because that character at the end of that book has not begun the growing up process. And so I said, so I wanna write about that. How do we grow up? And, um, so it took, um, took 20 years to pull that off.

Doug Smith ([13:52](#)):

Wow. So first we have to recognize that we're not exempt from trouble too. You actually say to anticipate Yeah. Trouble. Is that, is that more about just a mindset of just recognizing when it comes, I shouldn't be surprised by this? Or talk more about anticipating

John Stahl-Wert ([14:05](#)):

No, you build it into, um, anything. Uh, I'll give you a concrete example. Um, I'm a visionary and, and my hardwiring is strategic. You give me a problem. Uh, my brain maps pathway through. Um, I don't see problems. When I have a strategy, I see solutions. And that creates a tremendous vulnerability. And, um, I remember back, uh, I was 18 years at Pittsburgh Leadership Foundation and, um, a very, very dear friend was chair of my board. Uh, his, his name is Dick Johnson. He's retired now. He had come out of Gulf Oil and, um, he was a tremendous operations chief and, um, implementer of complex things. And I would share a vision of something, a, a strategy for something. And my, my track record around envisioning and strategizing things is pretty solid. My, my mind works well. I easily reject cool ideas that won't work.

John Stahl-Wert ([15:13](#)):

<laugh> and Dick would come at me with questions. Hmm. And, you know, as a 35 year old CEO that was terribly discouraging. Well, what about this? And have you thought about this? And, um, you know, if we do this and that happens, then what is going on? And what he was doing is, um, he was anticipating. And so to build in a capacity to, you know, take that beautiful idea you have, or the best case scenario that you're sure is gonna work out and put contingencies behind it and think through, you know, what would we do if we had to go to plan B? It, it's just wise, uh, not to take away the, you know, the, the power of vision and of boldness, but to temper it. Um, and so I needed to grow another decade to realize that, uh, people wired to ask questions and to poke holes at good ideas are essential by wellbeing. And so that's the spirit in which that second point is, uh, is offered.

Doug Smith ([16:20](#)):

Yeah. And, and the third, which again, I just wanna run through them all cause they're so good. Third, is to actually admit, which for leaders, I know this can be incredibly difficult, but actually admit you're in trouble. Yeah. What, what do you have to say about that?

John Stahl-Wert ([16:31](#)):

Well, um, a buddy of mine, um, uh, named Glen Maine, uh, two decades ago said, T cubed tell the truth. All progress begins with telling the truth. And, um, it is impossible to make progress if we cannot admit that we have a problem as baseline. There's a, there's a Christian theological side to this. It is impossible to begin a journey of transformation if we can't say I am inadequate on my own. Admit, you're in trouble. Baseline for a bright future is being able to say, I messed this up. I feel lost. Um, I'm in pain. I'm a sinner. I broke it. You know, whatever, whatever it is to be able to say that was on me. Uh, first of all, we can't get help that that jumps the gun here a little bit. But we're not in a posture of even being provable. Hmm. If we always have to play close to the vest and everything's great, and how are you doing? Fantastic. We're not in a posture of a, of provability. And so if you wanna lock yourself in to a permanently stuck place, don't admit you have problems.

Doug Smith ([17:46](#)):

<laugh>. Wow.

John Stahl-Wert ([17:47](#)):

Yeah.

Doug Smith ([17:48](#)):

We, um, I heard Henry Cloud say once that, I think he said 90% of the, the executives that he works with, or this could be a national study, don't have a single person in which they can actually confide in that they trust. Yep. You work with leaders all over the place. Right. When it comes to leaders admitting that they need help or they're admitting that they're going through trouble, where do you recommend they start? Because they may not, should they just share that with their executive team, with their board? Should they join a collaborative like yours? Like where, because I think a lot of times leaders just don't know where to turn. They haven't developed that community that, that they need any recommendations there?

John Stahl-Wert ([18:21](#)):

Yeah. Well, you asked the question really well. You said, where should they start? And, um, that's a wisdom call. That's a, that's a judgment matter. Um, there are people around certain kinds of executives that if the executive lowers their guard and says, I have a problem, they will be taken advantage of. And, um, don't catch your pros before swine. If, if our suffering, or if our difficulty is the pearl, if we lay things out, we, we've gotta use some judgment. You know, we, we can bring our struggle to people who will use it to undermine us or use it to climb above us. Um, yeah. Or use it to cause harm. And so there's gotta be a wisdom element to that. A trusted friend, a pastor, a trusted counselor, a trusted coach. If you, you know, if you've been gangbusters and always telling everybody in the world that, uh, you're the, you're the best thing since slice bread, I'd start with a pretty confidential place.

John Stahl-Wert ([19:23](#)):

So you can start to get used to that. But it's interesting to me that senior veteran, well-established leaders who are not vulnerable any longer to sabotage and manipulation and, um, people who are usurping them are very transparent with their troubles in many settings. Um, and, um, you know, I, uh, I spent some time with, uh, one of my favorite leaders in Pittsburgh, uh, spent a lot of time with a man named Ray Butler. And, um, I was a pretty young man the first time I went into Bombardier and sat with Ray, who was president of Bombardier, uh, that's the American pe automated people mover division of the global German company, and sat with his leadership team and listened to Ray talk very, very candidly with his executive team about their problems, his problems, their needs, things they weren't doing well enough things he was working on.

John Stahl-Wert ([20:26](#)):

But that was a pretty seasoned place in the journey, Doug. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. And, um, so, um, sometimes a person just wants to be authentic and lay it all out and the game is over because they haven't even established their credibility, or they haven't surrounded themselves with, with people of integrity and people who've got their back. And, you know, it might be a moment of honesty, but, um, but they get rolled. And so it's, it's a judgment call, um, you know, playing it close to the vest. There are, there are places to do that, you know, uh, at any stage of life because we have to be wise as a serpent and innocent as a dove. But increasingly, as years go by, we want to be on teams, and we want to have a family in which sharing the truth is easy. It's easy, uh, and it's safe.

John Stahl-Wert ([21:23](#)):

Uh, you know, the wonderful thing about Alcoholics Anonymous, um, which our city, Pittsburgh has such a relationship with, because Sam Shoemaker, who was a remarkable influencer of this city back in the fifties, led Bill W and Dr. Bob to sobriety, the founders of AA, they both said that Sam Shoemaker, our Pittsburgh, you know, hero gave them the 12 steps. And right at the beginning, you know, in the AA

meeting, you stand up and you say, Hey, my name's John and I'm an alcoholic. And what is that? Um, it's putting it out there. And then what happens? Everyone says, Hey, John, in other words, us two like this isn't now gonna become a gossip session about what a terrible person John is. You know, he was honest. We're gonna lie. Right. Um, it's a beautiful thing to find ourselves in a community of grace and truth, and it's important for our growth.

Doug Smith ([22:21](#)):

Yeah. That's so good. And leaders, again, we say this all the time, it's one of our core values as community, no leaders should do life alone, but in community. Right. And if you don't have a place where you're fully known, fully loved, and fully challenged, you need to do everything you can in the next year, uh, to find that. Cuz there's, there's nothing better, uh, fully

John Stahl-Wert ([22:38](#)):

Known, fully loved, fully challenged, and inside the loved means that your humanness does not become a chin that other people can begin to maneuver to take advantage of you, you know, deep trust. And, um, that is, you know, what we're searching for. Um, I think in life is a place where we're at the table and we can bring what we have to that table, our assets and our needs. And other PE people can bring what they have to the table and we're in full fellowship with one another. I totally agree with.

Doug Smith ([23:13](#)):

That's so good. John, you mentioned coaching, you know, all that pastoring and, and things like that speak for itself. Therapy, uh, you coach leaders, I've been, I've been a beneficiary of your coaching. Um, if that's a place where maybe leaders have thought, I don't need a coach, could that be a place for them? And, and why do in your opinion, leaders need coaches in their lives?

John Stahl-Wert ([23:33](#)):

Uh, anyone who wants to perform well gets coaching. Hmm. And so use the, use the sports analogy. Uh, Michael Jordan's so good. He doesn't need a coach. Tiger Woods so good. He doesn't need a coach, just go down the line. That's ridiculous. Um, we're good at what we're good at. We know what we know. We don't know what we don't know, and we don't know where the gaps are. You know, if I could, if I could fix the things that are wrong, um, well then I wouldn't, they wouldn't be wrong already, <laugh>, I would've already fixed them. And so coaching is another, you know, it's another presence. It's somebody who's, who's had some life, um, you know, who's been through some things. I want to be with a coach who, who has failed and fallen down and, you know, and, um, and, and suffered.

John Stahl-Wert ([24:24](#)):

And, and Can I digress a second please. The, the best leaders on earth. Um, you know, I've, I've had this, this amazing privilege of being close to hundreds and hundreds of veteran leaders who have, you know, we know them now at the top of their game, at the, at the head of their industry. You look around them and you see workplaces where people thrive and you see, you know, brand positions that are enviable and you see, you know, market share. That's, that's just amazing. And they attract good people and they retain good people. And, um, people feel like tall human beings in those workplaces. And I don't know a single leader who understood how to do that at the beginning.

Doug Smith ([25:12](#)):

Hmm.

John Stahl-Wert ([25:13](#)):

I don't know. Wow. Among all the finest leaders on earth, A single one who understood how to do it when they started. So they got help. Uh, they learned, they got coached, they went through the, you know, the, the school of hard knocks. They were improved by what happened to them. You know, going through a lot of experiences doesn't guarantee we get better. Experience is not the best teacher. You know, I know people who've experienced everything and they're horrible people

Doug Smith ([25:46](#)):

<laugh>.

John Stahl-Wert ([25:47](#)):

So experience with learning the capacity, you know, the capacity to say, this is my fault. And the capacity to say I need help and these are so important. Uh, and when, when you look at someone you really admire, I promise you, uh, they went through a lot of hard things. So I want, for coaching in my life, I want someone who went through a lot of hard things and was improved by it. I don't want a slick answer man at all. I don't want that person at all.

Doug Smith ([26:18](#)):

So good. Um, follow up there, just cuz we, we've already been talking about it. Can you talk a little bit more about the programs and coaching that you offer Sure. Uh, through the center for Yeah, that would be great.

John Stahl-Wert ([26:28](#)):

Yeah. So, uh, we, we have a core piece of work, uh, we've been doing for a long time, build on the book the Serving Leader. Uh, we bring leaders together either in public where they come from, multiple companies within a geography. And we do this across the us We do this in Asia, we have an office in Singapore, and then we have staff here. We have staff there, we have staff here. And they spend six months, um, part of a day, up to a day a month, depending on how much bandwidth they have, uh, in inside hospital systems. Chiefs of medicine, chiefs of surgery, uh, they'll give us two hours once a month, but they go through a learning process each month. And it has an application piece. Uh, in other words, it's not information or inspiration or concepts, it's tools and discipline practices that I gathered from watching good leaders around the world, watching that they were doing those things.

John Stahl-Wert ([27:29](#)):

And then they have a month to implement small implementations, then we come back together and check it out how to go. We add another one. So we call that a serving leader cohort. And, uh, we offer them, um, you know, in a variety of geographies. We offer them virtually online because everything is also digitized and filmed. Then we have shorter courses. We have what's called the serving leader Short course. We have a little course online that's called Charting Your Leadership Journey for people who are just beginning to think through the, the journey that's ahead. Um, we have a master executive cohort, which you went through, which is for people who are asking longer range, um, legacy and vocation questions, uh, in a community there. We have 24 people we gather once a quarter for a year. And I do one-on-one coaching. And then our team does coaching.

John Stahl-Wert ([28:23](#)):

You know, we have certified coaches on our team and, um, we go inside companies and do all of this as well. So we will go inside and train tier after tier of leadership groups. We train their internal trainers, we turn everything that we have over to them so that they can do it without us. And so it's a, you know, from very light touches to very deep, um, sticky sustainable engagements where the, the companies that we have worked with are now carrying the work on without us, we're built for that. So it's a fully orbled leadership program, tightly focused how we need to behave better in our leadership to directly measurably impact the workplace culture and, uh, growth of people as measured in performance. And we put a big stock on accountability for outcomes. You know, if you're, if you're learning the right thing in leadership growth, it needs to show up.

John Stahl-Wert ([29:23](#)):

Customer facing, you ought to be able to see a year later that turnover has gone down, retention has gone up, um, costs have gone down, mistakes have gone down, customer satisfaction has gone up, or patient satisfaction. If we're learning something over here and the organization is not becoming more effective at serving the world that, you know, its mission is designed to serve, then, then I ask, you know, what are you learning over there? And so it's tightly inside leadership, culture, people, you know, um, because people are amazing when you win their hearts and you get their minds locked in and around what matters. And increasingly they can act and behave and initiate and make decisions customer facing knowing they know exactly what you would tell 'em to do. So they don't have to waste that customer's time to run back and get permission. They can just do good work. And we focus on that leadership space.

Doug Smith ([30:23](#)):

So good. And leader, if you're listening to this and you're connecting with John as, as we're having this conversation, can't encourage you enough. If, if you connect with him, check out his website. We'll include links to everything he just mentioned, uh, in the show notes. Again, I've gone through the program, it's phenomenal. I've been following and, and been a part of John's work for the past decade, so can't speak highly enough of it. Um, John, I wanna go back into just finishing up our conversation around the suffering leader. Sure. Um, I remember Craig, Rochelle <laugh>, he said when he was a young leader, he had a mentor come to him. He said, Craig, uh, before God uses you greatly, he's gonna break you. Um, good

John Stahl-Wert ([30:55](#)):

News, right,

Doug Smith ([30:56](#)):

<laugh>. Yeah. I, I'm curious is that, have you found that as you've spent time with all these high capacity leaders, have you found that the people that are being used in the greatest capacities have often been broken the most and, and actually redeemed their, their suffering and brokenness? Has that been your experience?

John Stahl-Wert ([31:14](#)):

Well, um, I don't disagree with the statement. Um, I would, um, I would nuance it a little bit. Uh, I, I don't think that the greatest path to the greatest impact requires the greatest tragedy, the greatest mistakes, and the greatest suffering. Uh, I think the path to the greatest impact requires a yielded heart, a yielded life, a repentant spirit. You know, I've seen human beings be improved by the smallest of

setbacks. And so if you would put this on a two by two, you know, where, um, not very many hard things happened. A lot of hard things happened. Not very much was learned a lot, not very much. Good stuff was learned. A lot of good stuff was learned. Um, there are people who did not go through particularly difficult things and learned maximally from what they did go through. Wow. And there are people who went through everything and <laugh>, and they're just drinking heavy now.

John Stahl-Wert ([32:23](#)):

You know, or, or they're, they're really putting on a show that's a, that's a scam, uh, to try to hold in the pain of their life. And so, and the other nuance, I I might make, uh, I re I completely agree with the comment. Um, uh, I don't know where to put, I mean, obviously God is sovereign over everything and whatever happens, happens by his allowance. Um, I don't think God is, um, uh, a punisher of human beings or a deliverer of everything that happens to us. Uh, life delivers things. This broken world delivers things and Satan delivers things. So the key issue is what do we do? What do we do with what happens to us? And how do we respond to those things? Some of them that God has orchestrated for us, some of them, the Satan has orchestrated for us, some of them that friends have orchestrated for us, and God is allowed.

John Stahl-Wert ([33:22](#)):

What do we, how do we respond to that? And, um, so I don't know a good leader who hasn't had a soft, um, responsive heart to change adjustment. Um, you don't have to be a great sinner. You know, what's a great sinner versus a not great sinner in God's eyes. But you don't have to be a horrible, great sinner to become a great human being. You do have to have a tremendous appreciation for the grace of God and for your need for God to become a great human being. Whether life dished out to you terribly unfair bucket, loads of oppression or a small dosage. You know, I, uh, I know people who've suffered everything and become beautiful. I know people who've suffered everything and become ugly. I know people who've suffered very little and become beautiful. And I know people who've suffered very little and become ugly. And so how do we respond to it?

Doug Smith ([34:26](#)):

That's so good. And, and you basically, the, the next step in the book is basically just to allow, which I think is the most difficult to allow trouble to actually do its work. Yeah. And leaders. I just wanna, again, John, you've influenced me so much. Uh, I just wanna read something. Hopefully you don't care that, that you said to me in one of our coaching calls, again, just the importance of having someone in your corner that you can listen to and fully knows you fully loves you fully challenges you. When I was going through my mental breakdown, John just said, uh, this is confirmation to keep going. God is mindful of the pain you're going through. He is not coldhearted, but not coddling you either. When he knows the good that is being forged, he allows us to suffer what we need to suffer. You have the resources to suffer through.

Doug Smith ([35:07](#)):

Uh, it's very similar to women in labor. There's great turmoil, but there's life coming on the other side. The will, the Lord will manifest fe manifest. Stay put, rejoice and be grateful for what you are and for what you're not. And, uh, again, I, that, that was three years ago. I'm reading it now three years later, just how impactful that was. Can you and I'm, I just want you to share, cause it Mr to me so much. If someone's listening to this and they're in the middle of, of probably the darker season of their life, what would your encouragement be to them?

John Stahl-Wert ([35:36](#)):

Um, well, first of all, life isn't fair. And, you know, it's, those words are difficult because different people have delivered to them more and less terrible things. Life isn't fair and I can't account for that. Um, but I do know that making room for God to redeem, um, giving time for God to restore is part of what is asked of us. And so allow trouble to do its work. Don't cut it short. And there's all kinds of ways to cut it short. You know, the extreme would be to take our own life, but we cut suffering short in all kinds of creative ways, uh, distracting ourselves or numbing ourselves. Um, uh, people get nasty in order to cut suffering short. They want someone else to hurt. So maybe, maybe if I can make them hurt, then maybe I won't hurt as much. I mean, there's all kinds of ways to cut suffering short.

John Stahl-Wert ([36:34](#)):

And, and so, you know, it's, these words are so hard to say and they're hard to live. Um, I have sought over the years to live these words. I've lived these words very inadequately. But, um, look to the Lord, you know, from when's come with our help, comes from him, forgive, turn our eyes into the future. You know, it's so tempting to, to turn around and begin to deal with that thing that shouldn't have happened. And then our life gets sucked into the past. Turn our life into the future, um, and, um, surround ourselves with people who encourage us and, uh, and pray for deliverance. You know, there, there are certain things that only God can restore us from, and that's a helpless feeling. Uh, and so we get up in the morning and we give our day to God. Um, you know, melanic and I practice this every day.

John Stahl-Wert ([37:29](#)):

We understand, um, what I'm talking about. And then we live through that day and we hang tight with one another. And at the end of the day we say, thank you, Lord, for what you did today. Put our head back on the pillow. And so, um, during hard seasons, it's like this. And, you know, I used the childbirth metaphor, and there are times in the middle of suffering, um, in labor that, that the mother can't remember what it was even for. And there was time on the cross, you know, Jesus said, God, why have you forsaken me? Um, for 30 years I've thought of that moment as a childbirth moment where the pain is so great that you can lose track of, there's, there's something coming on the other side of this. And, uh, and still he said, not my will. He said, not my will.

John Stahl-Wert ([38:28](#)):

And so, uh, our life doesn't belong to us, Doug. And, um, I recommend, um, not trying to own it or claim it or hold it or control it, letting it be what it is. Sometimes, you know, God delivers amazing blessings and seasons of abundance. And sometimes we're in the middle of difficulty. It's not our life. So hold ground, stay present. We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all surpassing power is from God and not from us. Where, where an instrument in the middle of difficulty, um, one of the most important mentors in my life, Bruce Bickle said many, many times, if God is sovereign, then we can't be a victim of circumstance. We can be a vessel in circumstance. Our life can be a jar in the middle of a mess. Resident in that jar is the Lord, therefore resident in that mess within us is the Lord. And sometimes, uh, for reasons we don't understand and would rather may not be true, we find ourselves in the middle of a mess. And so who said, you know, when you're going through hell keep going. I think that was

Doug Smith ([39:45](#)):

<laugh>. I think Churchill said that. Yeah.

John Stahl-Wert ([39:48](#)):

Said that. So, yeah.

Doug Smith ([39:50](#)):

No, that's so good. And, and I wanna transition, but you end the book by basically saying, trouble will perish and growth will prevail. And I just love that. So John, thank you for sharing about pain. I think it's so relevant to leaders today. Um, I wanna go in through the lightning round at the end, but I just wanted to touch on one more subject before we do. I'm 30, I'm gonna be 38 in two months. Uh, I feel like <laugh>, I just came to the realization at 37 that I'm no longer a young leader. Um, our executive director who, you know, held a meeting for emerging leaders in the organization and I wasn't invited and I said, Hey, how come I wasn't invited? He said, Hey, 35 and under. I'm, and I mean, I had to really ponder and think a lot that day, <laugh>.

Doug Smith ([40:30](#)):

Um, but I, I share that cuz I do feel like the, over the last two years out of that season of suffering, I've really stepped into a place of confidence in my leadership. Not arrogance, not thinking that I don't have any insecurities, but I feel like I spent so much of the first 20 years of my leadership journey just battling and trying to overcome insecurities and prove that I'm enough. And, uh, you made two statements, um, to me in our coaching time, I thought were significant in an area of, of confidence. You said it's hard to lead a calvary if you feel <laugh> that you look funny sitting on a horse. Uh, and then you just said, Doug, there's all the room in the world for you to make your unique contribution. Yeah. Can you just share anything on your heart on leaders who are battling insecurity like I did for so long?

John Stahl-Wert ([41:14](#)):

Yeah. I think one of the chief roots of our insecurity is, is comparison. Hmm. And, um, and I think it's devil's play. Um, I think it's demonic. Uh, I think it's a, I think it's a device of the demonic to make us compare ourselves with someone else. And a lot of insecurity grows up in that. And so we see that they're doing it this way and we're not wired to do it that way, or they're really good at this other thing. And we can see that how they're good at that thing is associated with their success and we're not good at that thing. And so in, in that comparison game, um, you know, Greek idealism, uh, demonic idea, there's an ideal form of things, right? And then everything is a couple of grades off of that. That's what makes the the young teenage girl look at the, you know, the 13 year old photographs, uh, in the drugstore, in the fashion magazine.

John Stahl-Wert ([42:12](#)):

And then go look in the mirror and realize that she's not like that ideal image. And then she has an eating disorder. Uh, Satan loves to tear us down. And so, so God is in the business not of producing the ideal or grades off of it. Uh, he's in the business of unique individual creations and he has purpose in it. Um, you know, that mixture of things you are and aren't, you know, um, is perfect for what he has in mind for you. It's also perfect for the community. He wants you with the spouse he wants you with. You know, the, the mixture of what you can do and what you can't do becomes the context of community and collaboration and, and alignment and joyful shared labor. And it's all in his design. And, uh, Satan, nothing, uh, threatens Satan more than an encouraged believer.

John Stahl-Wert ([43:17](#)):

Mm. Wow. Uh, and so discouragement is his, is his game. And so, um, I put your light, uh, up on the lampstand, don't put a bushel under it. You know, God's god's created that particular light and it pleases him and he has uses for it that are good. We'll hear about it later. Usually we don't know. And so, uh, what right do we have, uh, I talk to myself about this all the time. What right do we have to dim our light? Uh, let it, let it burn, um, let it shine. Well, it's not that great. It is what it is, right? Uh, it's what it is. So why is it relevant that it is what it is and it isn't what it isn't. Why is that relevant? It is what God designed. Let it shine cuz he's gonna do things with it. And, uh, he's gonna please himself.

John Stahl-Wert ([44:09](#)):

He's gonna lift up other people. You know, uh, people say things like, um, someone came to me and they said, Hey, remember that time 30 years ago and you don't remember and you said this to me, and it doesn't, you, you can't recall that. And it made such a difference to me. God is using us all the time, and mostly we don't see what he's doing. I think it's one of our chief issues. We can't see how he's using us. And I, I, I think it was 25 years ago, it, it became clear to me, that's not a problem. I can survive not knowing Hmm. What he is doing. Like what, what, what am I demanding that I be the master of the knowledge of the value of my own life? Wow. I mean, come on. I ought to be the master. I ought to be the, the expert on the exact value of the day I just lived. I mean, who do we think we are? And so lay it down and, um, we live through our day. We let God have the glory. We lay our head on the pillow at night and we say thank you, and, um, and we rejoice in the Lord.

Doug Smith ([45:25](#)):

Yeah. I I should have put the, I wrote down another quote of yours that it fits in the same thing, but I think it fits perfectly with what you just said. Again, this, this helped me so much. Again, I don't know if you remember saying any of this stuff that we, but you said, Doug, God takes responsibility for your life counting. Yeah. That, that was a game changing statement for me. Like, God, I don't have to take responsibility for my life counting. I just need to follow God and he'll do the rest. Yeah. And I admit so insightful what you just said of just, we can't even see 90% of the time how God's actually using us. So thank you for sharing that. Um, I wanted dive into the lightning round. I know I didn't have a lightning round in episode seven, so this will be fun. Just a bunch of fun questions I ask every leader. Uh, the first is, what is the best advice you've ever received and who gave it to you?

John Stahl-Wert ([46:06](#)):

Um, best advice. Um, um, the best advice I ever received and who gave it to me. So I'm, I'm gonna go back to, to, uh, Bruce Bickle, um, who said, um, uh, we said a couple of things to me. Uh, he, when I succeeded Reed Carpenter as president of Pittsburgh Leadership Foundation, he said, don't try to fill Reed's shoes, try to fill yours. Wow. He said, that's gonna be a big enough job for you. Another thing he said to me is that you being you and you being present where God has you as you are, is your calling. So occupy that space. So, um, there's my answer for that one.

Doug Smith ([46:45](#)):

If you could put a quote on a billboard for everyone to read, what would it say?

John Stahl-Wert ([46:51](#)):

Um, God loves bringing unique and beautiful things into a world that's waiting for them through broken human beings.

Doug Smith ([47:03](#)):

Hmm. Do you have any significant regrets in your leadership journey? And if you have more than one, just like, is there one that stands out that you wish you could go back and change?

John Stahl-Wert ([47:11](#)):

Well, um, I have to, I have to nuance my answer. Sure. Answer number one, no. If I would go back and change, uh, my failures, uh, then where would I be today? Hmm. And so I'm, you know, I'm, I'm pleased. I'm thankful for what God has done. And, um, you know, the worst things that have happened to me, the worst things I've done, have produced the most wonderful gifts in my life. So, uh, regrets, uh, no. Um, second answer. A whole ton of them, <laugh> and I, I'll tell you, I'll tell you one thing I wish I had gotten clear on sooner, and I'm very clear on it now. Whatever happens inside the organization, you lead. If you're the leader, you're responsible for it. Um, wow. You allowed it to happen or you did it <laugh>. And so, uh, playing victim, uh, has no place. Um, and if you're the leader and it happened, it's on you. Um, you allowed it or you did it. And, um, I didn't learn that as early as I might have. Yeah.

Doug Smith ([48:32](#)):

Thanks for sharing. Uh, you get to spend time with a ton of fantastic leaders. I'm curious, when you get to have dinner or lunch with a leader that you admire, do you have a go-to question or two that you always ask?

John Stahl-Wert ([48:43](#)):

No. Um, I, so I, I'm not, I'm not scripted. I, I often wish I were, I'm not designed that way. If I had a go-to question, I wouldn't remember it the next day. <laugh>.

Doug Smith ([48:56](#)):

So

John Stahl-Wert ([48:57](#)):

Everything, everything is kind of fresh and in the moment. Uh, I always ask them to, you know, to, uh, tell me how they are. I ask them to, to tell me the story of what they're working on. I ask them to share what's going on right now. Uh, and then that brings everything to life for me. And, and then I know how to engage. And, uh, I wish do I wish I had a go-to question. I, I don't know. I don't have one.

Doug Smith ([49:24](#)):

I love, I love the awareness around who you are and who you aren't. It's beautiful to tie it back into what you shared earlier. Uh, do you, oh, how about this? Do you have a favorite or, um, I'm not a fav, not a favorite. Do you have, uh, what's your biggest leadership pet peeve?

John Stahl-Wert ([49:39](#)):

Um, biggest leadership pet peeve? I guess it's, um, I guess it's selfishness. Um, mm. Uh, one of our colleagues in East Africa, uh, his name is John Juan bk in Dar Salam. Yeah. We're doing this serving leader work all over the world. And, um, the president of our company is Kenyan, uh, lives here in the United States. Uh, he's, he's heading back to Democratic Republic of the Congo, uh, very shortly. And John Juan bk since, um, we don't have a poverty, violence, or injustice problem in Africa so much as we have a leadership problem. Hmm. Look at the drc. It is the resource richest nation on earth. And the

corruption, the violence and the poverty, the injustice is terrible. Uh, I spent a lot of time in Singapore, it was our first office outside of the United States, specifically because of what they've done in leadership. Uh, in 1965, they were the poorest nation on earth.

John Stahl-Wert ([50:51](#)):

And, um, they had no resources. They don't have DRCs resources. And today they're number two in G D P per capita measured in purchasing power parity. Wow. And they built that by saying we could blame a lot of people. Uh, we could use the power of leadership to serve ourselves, but we're gonna turn that around and we're gonna teach ourselves and our people how to serve others. And leaders squander immense opportunity and human capacity by thinking of their leadership as for them. And this makes me angry. Uh, our leadership is not for us. Our life is not for us. We're here to make a difference for someone else if we do a good job. Um, Justin Mcle Hatton from Industrial Scientific said many years ago, I want my people focused on serving others. I don't want them focused on the bottom line. He said, if we do a good job of serving others, saving lives through industrial scientific, we'll live to stay in business another day. And so let's put first things first. What's first serve our customers, serve our standards, serve our values, serve our people. Do the right thing. First things first is isn't what can I get out of this? How can I make this work out better for me? That's not the first thing. That's my pet peeve.

Doug Smith ([52:20](#)):

I love it. Thank you for sharing that. John, anything else you wanna leave leaders with today?

John Stahl-Wert ([52:24](#)):

Well, just, just that I'm a fan of, of leadership. You know, when the, when I walk into any kind of an organization and I see, you know, front desk noticing customers right? When, when the door chimes and I see people, you know, looking away from their work to help. And when I see people, um, making sure that what they promise gets done, it's never an accident. It's never an accident. Uh, you know, good organizations are good because they're led well. Uh, leaders do such important work and, uh, it, they're suffering in it. You know, what I would say to the leaders who are listening to this is don't be daunted from leadership by the fact that there is suffering in it. Reality is they're suffering in life. Hmm. And we can dodge leadership to dodge suffering, but the suffering is in the soup just the same.

John Stahl-Wert ([53:23](#)):

You know, Jesus said to the disciples in Matthew 20, who wanted the, the left and right hand positions. He said, you know, you wouldn't ask for those positions if you understood that there's suffering there. And then he said, basically he said, well, you're gonna suffer anyway. So leadership I think is the, it's the, it's the advanced program for human growth. And everything that we wrestle to learn in leadership goes back to make us better. Husbands, wives, friends, neighbors, dads moms. Um, it's a good path. It's a path of responsibility. It's a path of learning to say, um, I will step forward and help with this. And, uh, it's daunting, but I recommend it. And I really, um, I'm a big fan of people who say yes, big fan of leaders who say yes. So I wanna say thank you to leaders.

Doug Smith ([54:24](#)):

Yeah. And I'll just end by saying thank you to you. Thank you for saying yes to your pursuit of being a serving leader for your entire lifetime and building up and raising up other servant leaders. It's changed my life. It's changed a lot of other leaders' lives. Things ultimately helped change the world to make it a better place. So thank you.

John Stahl-Wert ([54:38](#)):

It's my pleasure. Thanks so much, Doug.

Doug Smith ([54:40](#)):

Well Leader, thank you so much for listening to my conversation with John. I hope that you enjoyed it as much as I did. You can find ways to connect with him and links to everything that we discussed in the show Notes In Leader, I said every episode, but if you want to 10x extra growth this year, then you need to either launch or join in L3 leadership mastermind group, mastermind groups, or groups of six or 12 leaders that meet together for at least one year on a consistent basis to help each other grow, hold each other accountable and to do life together. For me personally, mastermind groups have been the greatest source of growth in my life over the last eight years. If you're interested in learning more about launching or joining a group, go to l3leadership.org/masterminds or email me at dougsmith@leadership.org. And I'd like to end every episode of the quote, and today, I'll quote Henry Cloud who said this, he said, your time is your life, period. How you spend it ends up being what your life is. Well leader, I hope you enjoyed this episode. Know that my wife and I love you. We believe in you and we say it every episode. But don't quit. Keep leading the world desperately needs your leadership. We'll talk to you next episode.