

Naturally Supernatural: Contemplative and Charismatic

I have just returned from the Naturally Supernatural Winter conference, held and hosted by Soul Survivor Church Watford. The form and substance of it would be familiar to anyone who has attended any of the Soul Survivor youth festivals in the last couple of decades: Charismatic worship and ministry that is both invigoratingly contemporary and solidly cemented in old school Wimberesque wisdom.



My intention here is to give a short reflection on my own personal experience of this week, and highlight one particular realisation: Not only was this a charismatic conference, with all its joys and highlights, it was also, unexpectedly, a contemplative retreat. Let me explain:

The *charismatic* aspect is obvious, not just in the substance of it, but in the form: Three sessions a day, each headed up by 45 minutes to an hour of musical worship, before a teaching time, and “ministry time.” NSN does it well. The songs (while occasionally a little, um, committed to the “high rotation” list) were *declarative*; they were *worshipful* in the truest sense of recognising God and our right place before him. The teaching was biblical, the personalities large but self-effacing, the prophetic words were gentle and constructive, and the times of expecting the Spirit to be ministering were emphatically disconnected from hype and manipulation. The focus was not on some glitzy self-prospering, but true mission; it was an exhortation to change the world, beginning by lining ourselves up with the love of God in Jesus. I’ve touched on this before.

The *contemplative* aspect of it, however, may not be a first thought. But look at it like this: My personal experience this week was a *spiritual journey*. It had this sort of shape:

1. An encounter with *hope*. The early times of worship (and excellent teaching from Ali Martin) connected me with the hope of the gospel. My encounter began with comfort, feelings of being able to soar, and of being called to deep life-changing gospel truths.
2. An encounter with *brokenness*. The Word of God *reveals*. We find ourselves *exposed* with our hurts, sins, brokenness. I felt *blocked*, incapable of fully grasping or expressing the love of God. It was a time of thirsting, of being uncomfortable. *As the deer pants for the water*, I experienced a longing for the rich absolution of a renewed "*right spirit*" within me.
3. An encounter with *godly frustration*. As speaker after speaker (but I'm thinking especially of Tre Sheppard) reminded us again and again of the mission of God, those old vocational fires began to burn. They had been smouldering and now they were blown into a consuming flame. "Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" (1 Cor 9:16). Even if it means I burn up, "for the sake of the world, burn like a fire in me."
4. An encounter with *painful release*. There are times when Mike Pilavachi is Grecian comic, and then there are times when he speaks words of heavy, pregnant, prophetic, truth. As he spoke about the call of the church away from dysfunction to mission, the truth lapped upon me like antiseptic on a wound. The Spirit of God took me by the hand to encounter some of those hurts and burdens that accrue in ordained ministry, even and especially in this otherwise green and pleasant land. I groaned from the depths of myself, as the Holy One reached in to heal. "Even what the enemy means for evil, he turns it for our good."
5. An encounter with *gentle mercy and ministry*. I could

describe it like this – “I was able to pray for and minister to others” – but that wouldn’t be entirely accurate. It was more a case of being allowed to stand close to people and watch the Spirit of Christ do his thing. I got to watch and pray, to observe and listen, to simply be alongside those who were being brought to something new. What a privilege. When I got to say something, all I was doing was describing what I could see: “prophetic” words as a simple testimony of the immediate. And others did the same for me; loving words were both given and received.

6. An encounter with *peace*. At the end of the week I received a benediction, spoken over me not by the grand Greek guru at the front, but by a young woman who had the boldness to approach a big ugly Australian with a word of encouragement. It released, commissioned, and completed something. What a gift.
7. An encounter with *fellowship*. Connections of kindredness that welled up and simply happened. Brothers and sisters to know by name. Recognition of one another. Collegiality. “Your bride will come together, and we’ll sing.”

The thing is, I’ve been on these sorts of spiritual journeys before. On quiet days, or in weeks of gentle guidance and “alone time” at a retreat centre, I’ve also had these encounters with hope, brokenness, pain, mercy, ministry, peace, and fellowship. I have wept similar tears on top of a Tasmanian mountain reading 1 Corinthians during a day “away from it all.” I have been led through pain into peace in quiet services of compline after a day walking in the Gloucestershire countryside. I have found fellowship and fraternity in weeks spent with brothers in a mutual mentoring “pastor’s retreat group.”

Similarly, in the last little while I’ve been exploring different ways in which I am able to pray. After all, prayer

is the only thing left in the belly of the whale. Sometimes the point of the season is to lean back into fishy stomach walls, and learn to trust that the Lord will bring about a vomiting at the right time and place. There we pray. This prayer is prayers of suffering, prayers of forsakenness, and simple prayers of quietness. We seek the face God and we learn to offer an inner sacrifice, not only of our praise, but of our buzzing anxieties and frantic minds. And we breathe.

In the midst of this week's charismatic experience, I have been finding myself praying this way. I have drawn on contemplative depths to fathom the charismatic ones. In the midst of worship, I am offering contemplative prayer. While observing the Holy Spirit at work in the tears around me, I am quietening my soul. I am content to allow, and observe, and not to push and to strive. There is grace in that.

There's no doubt about it, Naturally Supernatural is not the same experience as a silent retreat. But in this week I've seen something of the depths of spirituality that are common to both the charismatic and the contemplative. I knew it intellectually, and I've seen it in Gill (who is years ahead of me on this), but this week I've *realised* it profoundly. The charismatic and the contemplative are not so far apart: they draw us to the heart of God. Both whisper to us the Word of God. Both fuel us with the Spirit of God. Both embrace us with the blessing of being in Jesus Christ.

For the sake of the world, burn like a fire in me.

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Q&A: Does a desire for forgiveness mean faith?

Anonymous asks:

If someone claims to be without faith, yet morally knows they have done something “wrong” due to our God given in built moral compass (even if said person chooses to not believe that God gave them the compass) and is looking for forgiveness, does that mean they have faith...? I guess they will only feel forgiven if they realise who they must submit to, which leads them to faith...? It is almost like our inbuilt ability to continually fall short of the inbuilt compass leads us to God. Smart design. Seek and you shall find.

[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this blog or asked of me elsewhere and posted with permission. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: <http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/>]

This question has come in response to our latest sermon series in the evening at St. Nic's. Thank you for it. You've put forward something very interesting. Let's unpack it a little, explore this hypothetical person's situation, and look to see where faith can be found...



You talk about someone who “morally knows that they have done something wrong.” This is an experience that is common to all people (excluding a sociopath or two) and is simply the operation of our conscience. Theologically, we can find the roots of conscience in our identity as image-bearers of God, *and* in the loss of innocence grasped by the eating of fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But our conscience doesn't depend on faith, it is simply a part of

who we are as human beings. Similarly, a pricked conscience doesn't necessarily lead to faith, or anything else in particular. We all know what it means to deaden our conscience, and harden our hearts.

However, there is also an experience that we might describe as "being convicted of sin." This something different to feeling guilty about something, it is about an awareness of a fractured relationship with our maker. It can feel like dread, but always has a sense of hunger to make it right, even if we are at a loss for words and aren't sure of what we can do about it. It's what is happening when the *psalmist* writes, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight." This is what is happening when Peter witnesses Jesus at work and *cries out* "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!"

The big question is whether this sense of conviction is an aspect of faith. I think I'd like to turn it the other way around and consider how faith is present in the conviction of sin. After all, you cannot understand yourself to be disconnected from God's holiness if you don't have some sense of belief that God exists, and that he is holy. The longing for forgiveness is a longing for restoration of relationship, and for me, that is faith:

And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. (Hebrews 11:6)

True conviction of sin, a ministry of God's Spirit awakening our own, draws us to God in search of his grace, even if it is on our knees. And, as you say, "seek and you shall find."

The conundrum with your hypothetical person is that we see something of an existential wrestle: Clearly he is looking for forgiveness from someone, yet has "chosen to believe that God has not given them their moral compass." It's a tension

that can't last! Either what we are seeing is simply the operation of conscience, or it is true conviction and will find its end. In the meantime it is existential disequilibrium, and while it may take some time for it to resolve, that is what will happen. As you say, it's a smart design.

What is clear is that it presents an urgency to be ready with the gospel, in word and deed. If someone is seeking the path of reconciliation, we show them Jesus, and bear witness to how he has overcome the power of sin with newness of life. Conviction finds its end in Jesus as forgiveness and assurance, and that is very much the stuff of a life of faith.

Q&A: What is the significance of Jerusalem being the capital of Israel?

Anonymous asks:

My question is the significance of Jerusalem being made capital again. My reaction is yay, hallelujah!!

In Nehemiah 2 an Arab was amongst those ridiculing Nehemiah m helpers n in b 20 saying they have no right to any property in Jerusalem n no share in traditions.

My feelings run along side as God gave His people the Jews, Jerusalem.

It's all in end time prophecy but I'm seriously out of date wth the latest happenings.

Your enlightenment would b so appreciated. Tks so much.

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Thanks for the question. The topic is loaded with some political energy, so I'm hoping to tread carefully.

I need to begin with the significant caveat that I have no expertise in international politics, and certainly not in Middle Eastern affairs! My limited understanding of the current situation leads me to the following initial thoughts.

1) There has not actually been any significant change in the actual status of Jerusalem. As far as I am aware, the nation state of Israel has pretty much always claimed Jerusalem to be its capital, even if the administrative centre is in Tel Aviv. The complexity is that the displaced Palestinians also claim Jerusalem as their capital. What *has* changed is that President Trump has announced that the US will *recognise* that Jerusalem is the capital of Israel, and implement this through the relocation of the US embassy. While this is controversial, it is not a surprise, and it is an action that has been mooted by other US presidents in recent years.

2) Personally, I don't think my reaction can be "yay, hallelujah!" Irrespective of its justifications or otherwise, this is a *provocative* action on President Trump's part. It seems pretty clear that the socio-political situation in and around Jerusalem is highly anxious. The

cliche of “powderkeg waiting for a spark” seems to fit. Bloodshed *is* possible. Diplomacy and care *is* needed. While I’m not in full disagreement about the US recognition of Jerusalem, (the “recognition of reality” line has some merit), I’m not sure President Trump has pursued the way of peace in this situation. Certainly, many other leaders, including the UN, have decried the escalation.

3) Before I get to the theological aspects (see below), it is clear that Jerusalem is a conundrum of competing claims, all of which have at least some degree of validity. I understand that the Palestinians, through no fault of their own, *have* been displaced from a city and a land in which they have lived for generations. I understand that the Jewish community has also experienced displacement (and worse!) in the last century, and that they have genuine ethnic links to Jerusalem and the land also. I also suspect that there is some significant “proxy activity” going on as the tensions in Jerusalem connect with the power plays of broader political forces. Injustice is the order of the day, and it’s a difficult thing to wade through.

Theologically, I can only begin to approach this issue by noting the *differences* between the people and nation of Israel that we see in the Bible, and the contemporary nation and state of Israel in modern politics. The biblical notion of Israel is that of a covenant people (a people of *promise*), descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (who was later, personally, called *Israel*). They are a people defined by these roots of divine promise, and the subsequent foundation of divine rescue as they are brought out from Egypt under Moses, and called by the Law towards the goals of the original covenant. This identity reached something of a zenith under King David, who established Jerusalem as a political capital in about 1000 BC. His son, King Solomon, responding to the Mosaic law, established Jerusalem as a *holy* city, building the temple that encapsulated all that the Mosaic tabernacle had

beforehand. It became the tangible and symbolic manifestation of God's promise and presence.

The modern state of Israel, while having clear ethnic and historical roots in this theological understanding, can be considered in contrast: It is a "Jewish and democratic state", and, as I understand it, the "Jewish" part is understood *ethnically* not *religiously*. As a political entity there is very little that sets it apart as being particularly shaped by an Abrahamic, Mosaic, or Davidic identity. Its establishment as a nation state lies in post-war turmoil and involves the actions of Zionist activists, and the political machinations of Western powers, leading to a formal recognition in 1948. Even among orthodox Jews, there has been controversy about the form and formation of modern Israel. I understand that Haredi Jews, for instance, consider the re-establishment of Israel without the Messiah to be an act of presumption and rebellion against God.

The presence of Jesus in salvation history also impacts our understanding. The person of Jesus interacts with the base shapes of theological identity – Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic – in a way that cannot be ignored. In particular, we understand that Jesus *fulfils* these covenant. Jesus fulfils the Abrahamic covenant – the family who was "blessed to be a blessing" has brought forth its ultimate blessing. Jesus fulfils the Mosaic covenant – he obeys the law and receives the covenant blessings, sharing them with his people as he covers them sacrificially. Jesus fulfils the Davidic covenant – he is the "big-M" Messiah, the anointed King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Jesus is the Temple, where the presence of God is manifest. Jesus is the Promised Land, in which we have "every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places." In his risen life, Jesus extends this promise to all those (Jews and Gentiles alike) who would follow him, put their faith and trust in him, and so receive his Spirit and be counted amongst his people.

What this means, is that when I read stories in the Old

Testament, such as the one you mention where Nehemiah rebuilds Jerusalem and faces his opponents, I understand the story in the light of Jesus. Nehemiah, in verse 20 of chapter two, says to Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem, "The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it." For me, I see a man, grasping the promises of God and moving forward in faith and favour in order to see the covenant promises manifest once more. I see the powers of this world, that would frustrate God's purposes, put rightly in their place. This is, with bricks and mortar, the same prayer as "Thy Kingdom come, they will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Nehemiah wants to re-establish Jerusalem, and I draw from that a desire for Christ's rule to be made more manifest.

This is something that the New Testament imagines as the "New Jerusalem." And President Trump's declaration does not particularly enter into it!

Nevertheless, I am not intending to completely spiritualise the reality of Jerusalem and the Holy Land. Physical locations are important. Ethnic identity is important also. And these are particularly so when they are filled with such historical and theological meaning. For myself, I turn to Romans 11, where Paul speaks not only of the inclusion of the Gentiles into the promises of God, but mourns the apparent intransigence of his own people, the Jews. Yet he is full of hope, that even in their stumbling they are fulfilling their calling:

I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in, and in this way all Israel will be saved. As it is written:

'The deliverer will come from Zion;

*he will turn godlessness away from Jacob.
And this is my covenant with them
when I take away their sins.'*

(Romans 11:25-27)

The calling on Israel and Jerusalem is to be a light to the nations (Isaiah 49:6). That calling is caught up into the Messiah, Jesus, who has embraced it, fulfilled it, and continued it by “grafting” the Gentiles of faith into the covenant people of God. But that doesn’t mean the calling has waned. It remains Jerusalem’s calling – to shine a light, to bless the world, to truly be the city of peace. For that to happen, for the “end” to be reached, Jerusalem doesn’t so much need the proclamation of a President, but the ministry of her Messiah.

Come, Lord Jesus.

Q&A: Do we neglect the doctrine of hell?

Sarah asks:

Hi Will,

Do we neglect the doctrine of hell? I recently read Jonathan Edwards’ “sinners in the hands of an angry God” and my reaction was:

*To marvel at the magnitude of my rescue;
To be reminded of the urgency of sharing the gospel and my part in that.*

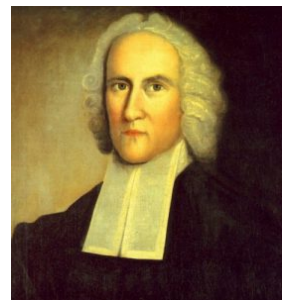
(I also thought you'd have to be brave to talk like that in our generation!)

I understand that Jesus spoke more of hell than heaven. Salvation is a rescue – should we talk more about the reality of hell both to draw people to the Rescuer, and to increase our worship of God and our evangelism, whilst avoiding both the Middle Ages fascination with grisly imagery and the laughed off sandwich board person proclaiming that the end is nigh. If I am honest, (and holding this alongside election) I want to belong to God to escape the horror of hell.

A related question is do we neglect the doctrine of heaven...

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Hi Sarah, thanks for the question.



I must admit, I've never read this sermon from Edwards, (which was penned in 1741, and now available online for those who are interested). He is preaching on Deuteronomy 32:25 :- *To me belongeth vengeance, and recompence; their foot shall slide in due time...* (to use Edwards' probable translation). I haven't been able to look at it in depth, but there are a couple of things to note that can help us here:

Firstly, Edwards gets the *audience* right, at least initially. The text is not so much about God raging against the world, it is about God's broken heart about *his own people*! Edwards describes them as "wicked unbelieving Israelites, who were God's visible people, and who lived

under the means of grace; but who, notwithstanding all God's wonderful works towards them, remained... void of counsel, having no understanding in them."

In this he is, indeed, reflecting the focus of judgement language in the New Testament. e.g. Jesus uses language such as "hypocrites" and John talks about "a brood of vipers", referring to his own people. Similarly, it is the *temple* which will have no stone left on top of another. It is a message, first and foremost, *to the people of God*, including the church.

This understanding locates judgement in the midst of grace. Jesus is no Pharisee, loading down but not lifting a finger to help. No, he is the good shepherd, reflecting the heart of his Father. He has *come* to his intransigent people, to take responsibility for them if they would have him.

You ask "should we talk more about the reality of hell?" If we do, we need to take heed; we can't preach judgement without going through our own refining fires. And sometimes I see a whole bunch of tinder-dry unChristlikeness amongst those who take Christ's name. I fear it needs to be a great conflagration, and I am well and truly including myself in this brood.

Secondly, Edwards asserts that the wrath of God is real and present, withheld only by his grace, and he is right about this. This is hard for people to hear, (we are understandably uncomfortable with divine anger!), and it should always be communicated clearly. But it must be, and can be, communicated:

After all, the wrath of God is simply an aspect of his justice. It isn't fickle, or out-of-control. It is the appropriate response to wrongdoing. We are bland and apathetic, God is not. We harden our hearts and walk past injustice, God does not. There are times we should be

more *angry* at the unchecked sin in the world, and certainly at the unchecked sin in our own lives. The fact that there are homeless people on the streets of my otherwise middle-class town, is an injustice, it should *move* us. The tears of a teenager misused by her porn-addicted boyfriend, should induce something in us; a cry for justice at the least, the power to act if we can. Those who don't want God to be wrathful shouldn't also ask us to care about #metoo. God is not #meh about this world.

Similarly, the wrath of God is never disconnected from his righteousness and his grace. We sometimes have this image of God as someone caught in an internal battle "Do I love them, or do I hate them?" No, God is love in all things. "Making things right" through bringing justice in judgement is an act of love. Withholding judgement as an act of grace is love. When we face analogous issues – say, perhaps, in our parenting – we often experience conflict because we lack the wisdom, or the security, or, indeed, the affection to do it well. God does not lack those things.

So should we talk about these things? Yes. In fact, our current series at the St. Nic's evening service is looking at the foundations of faith, drawing on the list in Hebrews 6:1-2 as an inspiration. "Eternal judgement" is one of the topics we will be looking at. The application will likely include those things that you mention: gratitude about the grace of God, and urgency about declaring the gospel. It will also include the imperatives that relate to pursuing God's the Kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.

But your question is not just about judgement, it is about the concept of hell. And this is where you'll probably find that I differ from Edwards. I push back at the caricature of "total eternal torment", for I find little, if any, of it in the Bible. If anything, the *exact nature* of the final state after judgement, is a second-order issue for me; I won't go to the stake for it.

My eschatology (my understanding of “the end”) looks to the renewal of this earth as the gospel hope. I’ve talked about this in my review of N. T. Wright’s excellent *Surprised By Hope*. Wright draws on C. S. Lewis with regards to the outcome of judgement, and speaks of a final state of “beings that once were human but now are not, creatures that have ceased to bear the divine image at all.”

Wright’s view has merit. My own take is closer to *annihilationism*, that the outcome of eternal judgement is either eternal life (for those in Christ), or simply ceasing to exist (you can’t get more eternal than that). I’ve written about this before, and I won’t reiterate it here.

So yes, we should talk about these things more. But here’s my final thought: You say “I want to belong to God to escape the horror of hell” and I get that. But I don’t think I would quickly, if ever, say it that way. I *would* say this: I want to belong to God, because he is the most holy, delightful, awe-inspiring, identity-giving, glorious One. He is my eternal Father, and I love him.