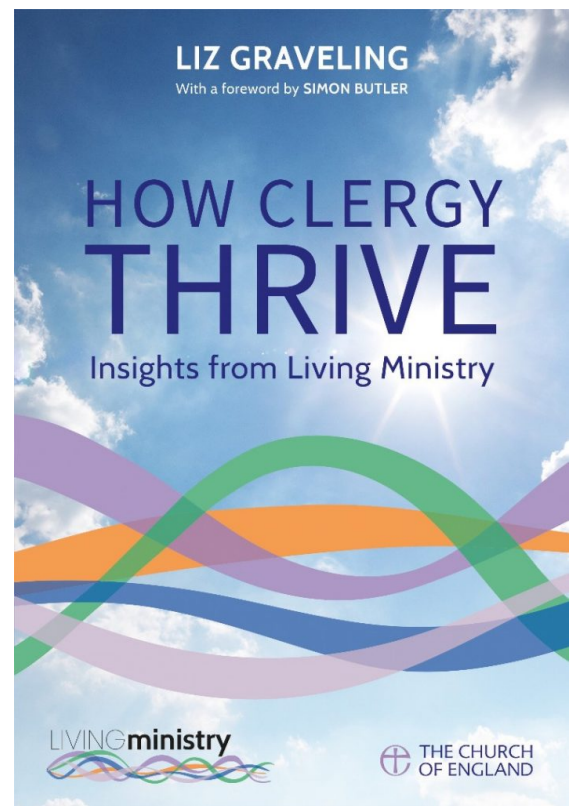


Review: How Clergy Thrive – Insights from Living Ministry

How Clergy Thrive is a short report in the Church of England that was released in October 2020. It provides insights from the *Living Ministry* research programme, a longitudinal study into clergy wellbeing that has been following four cohorts of clergy and their families. It is substantial research and author, Liz Graveling, presents it well. It pushes in the right direction but, unsurprisingly, falls short of a fulsome exhortation for the cultural and structural changes that are really needed.



I have attended enough “resilience” sessions at clergy conferences to approach a report on this topic with a healthy cynicism. This report avoids many of the normal pitfalls.

For instance, clergy wellbeing is often reduced to a matter of individualised introspection and the promotion of coping mechanisms. Refreshingly, this report recognises that “wellbeing” is a “shared responsibility” (page 7). It notes that the “the pressure to be well”, itself, “can sometimes feel like a burden”. Indeed, “clergy continuously negotiate their wellbeing with institutions, social forces and other people: family members, friends, colleagues, parishioners, senior clergy and diocesan officers, as well as government agencies and market forces.” We clergy live in a complex web of ill-defined social contracts. We are often the least defended from the inevitable toxicities. A recognition of this

system is a good foundation.

Similarly, the multifaceted approach to “vocational clarity” (page 9) deals well with actual reality. There is always a gap between the “calling” of ministry and the “job” of ministry, between the way in which the Holy Spirit gifts someone to the body of Christ, and their institutional identity. In my experience, the wellbeing of a clergyperson is essentially shaped by one’s emotional response to that gap. Wellbeing is encouraged by stimulating and supporting a clergyperson to reach an honest, holistic, and healthy equilibrium. It is undermined by arbitrary training hoops and merely bureaucratic forms of institutional support. The short discussion on where annual Ministry Development Reviews are either helpful or not (page 9) or even damaging (page 10) indicates that this dynamic has been recognised. The many “questions for discussion and reflection” are also helpful.

It’s impossible, of course, to read something like this without evaluating my own wellbeing and the health of the institution to which I belong. I have my own experiences, of course, including some significant times of being unwell. Here, however, my attention has been turned to the cultural and structural problems that are revealed.

Take the surveyed statement “I feel that I am fulfilling my sense of vocation” (page 11). It is noted that “79% agreed they were fulfilling their sense of vocation.” This sounds reasonable. However, I’m not sure if that positive summary is quite what the data actually suggests. Only 47%, less than half, of the respondents can fulsomely agree with vocational fulfillment. The other 32% in that 79% can only “somewhat agree”, and a full 20% is neutral or negative.

In many professions this picture might be excellent. Retention rates for teaching, for instance, indicate a 30% loss after five years.¹ We must, however, make a distinction between an ordained vocation and most other professions. In ordained

life, one's profession is not just one facet of life, it *is* holistic (page 7); it captures many, if not all, of life's parts. *Integration* of those parts is key to being healthy. How can it be, then, that 53% of our clergy are not able to fully find themselves within the life of the church? From my perspective, this speaks of a consumeristic culture in which clergy are service-providing functionaries rather than charism-bearing persons. Perhaps it simply speaks to an unhealthy culture in which it is tolerable for square pegs to be placed in round holes despite the inevitable trauma. Whatever the case, this isn't about the church institutions *doing* wrong things, it's about innate ways of *being* wrong; we need to change.

We see glimpses of this same sense throughout. Consider the relative benefits of the activities that are meant to support clergy (page 14). The more positive responses correlate to personal activities or activities that are outside the institution: retreats, spiritual direction, mentoring, networks, and academic study. The institutional supports such as MDRs, Diocesan Day Courses, Facilitated Small Groups and so on, are of relatively less benefit. In fact IME Phase 2, the official curacy training program, scores worst of all! I cannot speak to IME – my curacy was in Australia – but the rest of the picture certainly matches my own experience.

This is observation, not disparagement. I generally sympathise with those in Diocesan-level middle management. They have tools and opportunities that look fit for purpose, but they so often appear to run aground on deeper issues they cannot solve. Dissatisfaction then abounds. A related observation is this: It appears to me that a common factor amongst the poorer scoring forms of support is that they are often *compulsory*. This invariably amplifies dissatisfaction. Appropriate accountability and commitment aside, compulsion usually reveals an institution propping itself up through confecting its own needfulness.

Again, when “sources of support” are considered (page 31), the ones most positively regarded are non-institutional: family, friends, colleagues, and congregation. Senior Diocesan Staff, Theological College, and Training Incumbent score low. This is understandable and perhaps it is unfair to make this comparison; no one is expecting the Bishop to be a greater source of support than one’s spouse. However, the question wasn’t about support in general, but about “flourishing *in ministry*”, and the picture remains stark. Note, also, that the most negative response that could be offered was a neutral “not beneficial.” If a negative “unhelpful” were counted, the picture might be even starker.

My point is that *cultural* problems are being revealed. If only 63% of respondents could agree, at least somewhat, that “the bishop values my ministry” (page 49) then this is not so much a problem in our bishops, and certainly not the clergy, but in the institution in which we all embody our office.

Remuneration and finances are also revealing. 45% of the respondents are “living comfortably”, but 81% of the respondents had “additional income” (pages 39-40) which, I suspect, relates mostly to the income of a spouse. To some degree, this is all well and good; a dual income usually means a better quality of life. Nevertheless, the sheer disparity in financial wellbeing between clergy couples with one or two incomes cannot be ignored. The provision of parsonage housing is a factor; in other occupations accommodation costs generally rise and fall along with household income and dampens the disparity. More importantly, however, is how this reflects the *individualisation* of vocation, and the shocking degree to which clergy spouses are simply invisible, for better or for worse, within the Church of England. It is also my experience, both personally and anecdotally, that the wellbeing of couples who are both clergy is not well assisted in our current culture. This is especially so for those called to “side by side” ministry, who share a ministry context and

usually only one stipend. It's well past time to allow for couples to be licensed and commissioned *as couples*, like many mission agencies do. We need the means to share remuneration packages and tax liability, and, at the very least, the provision of National Insurance and pension contributions for the non-stipended spouse. Our current culture does not allow for this.

Finally, this study would do well to extend its work to take into account the effects of incumbency on wellbeing. I wonder what proportion of the respondents, given their relative "youth" in career-length terms, have reached incumbent status? Incumbency comes with a certain level of stability, power, and protection. Attached to incumbency are checks and balances on institutional power. Incumbents are more clearly party to the social contract between clergyperson and institution. Associates, SSMs, permanent deacons, and the increasing numbers of crucial lay ministers are not as well protected. They *do* "find themselves overlooked or under-esteemed" (page 35). The increasing prevalence of non-tenured and part-time positions in the Church of England is a structural concern that *does* effect clergy wellbeing. We need more work here.

How Clergy Thrive has painted a useful picture. There is scope for even more insight. The benefit of longitudinal research is that the story of wellbeing can be told *over time*. The testimonials in this report reflect this and are very helpful. It is unfortunate, however, that most of the data is presented as a snapshot census-like aggregation across the cohorts. An accurate picture of how wellbeing ebbs and flows as a career progresses would help us all. If we knew, for instance, at what point in their career a clergyperson is most likely to not be thriving, we could respond. If clergy wellbeing suddenly drops, or if it slowly diminishes over time, that would teach us something also.

Like the vast majority of reports, this one struggles to answer the question of "What do we do about it?" How *do* we

help clergy thrive? In the end, it appeals to an acrostic: THRIVE (pages 56-57). It's not bad. It's healthy advice that I've given to myself and to others from time to time: Tune into healthy rhythms; Handle expectations; Recognise vulnerability; Identify safe spaces; Value and affirm; Establish healthy boundaries.

These principles are applied, to a small degree, to how the existing system might do a few things differently. In the main, however, they describe what clergy have managed to do for themselves. It's a story of *technical* changes for the institution, but *adaptive* change for the clergy. We need the reverse of that.

The life of a clergyperson exists in an impossibly complex interweave of pastoral, strategic, and logistical expectations. Technical changes in an institution often only add more expectation and more complexity. We have a structural problem. We have forces vectoring through things that are too old, too big, or too idolised to be modified. Instead, they are dissipated through the clergyperson, and other officeholders, but *not* the system itself. Personally, I've learned to find my place and peace with much of the machinery, and to look for the best in the persons who hold office. I have done this, in resonance with many of the testimonials in this report, by trusting real people when I can, and by not giving myself, or those I love, to the church system itself.

It's not enough for the ecclesiastical machine to *do* things better. It must *become* different. Take heed of the testimonial on page 25 – "I wouldn't really trust my diocese to make them aware that I have a mental health issue." Imagine, instead, that the diocese was for that person a fount, a fallback, a refuge, or a hope! In short, imagine if the church (ecclesiastical) really aligned with being a church (theological). That's the redemption we need. I wonder if the "big conversation" alluded to on page 6 will help.

Like most intractable problems, the hard thing is not about noting the problem. It's not rocket science; we "just" need real Spirit-filled personal nourishment and discipleship. It's the getting from here to there that is difficult. Difficult, but not dire. There are times when the right people are in the right place and it just works. For myself, I hold to a glimpse of how things might come to be:

What do clergy need to thrive? They don't need an "MDR", they need to be *overseen*: a regular conversation with a little-e episcopal someone who can cover them, is for them, and who has their back.

What do clergy need to thrive? They don't need strategic plans and communication strategies, they need to be treated as the little-p presbyters they are: brought into the loop, entrusted with substantial work without being second guessed, and given space to be themselves without having to watch their back.

What do clergy need to thrive? They don't need a "remuneration package", they need to be *provided for* with decent housing that's fit for *their* purpose, enough money to feed their family and prepare for the future, and an assurance that spouse and children will also be backed and supported without needing to beg or "apply."

Footnotes

1 – National Foundation For Educational Research, 2018

A Short Reflection on a

Decade of Weakness

I'm being more introspective than normal, but strangely, I feel I need to mark the day.



Ten years ago today I ran my brain into the ground. I had a “break-down.”

Some people don't like that negative imagery. They would rather speak of a “break-through” or something more positive. But let's not hide the reality; I broke my brain. It came from my own lack of wisdom, my unresolved insecurities and unhealthy drives, which collided with a complex and conflicted context. I used up all my fuel, and then some. I came to a crashing reverting-to-childlikeness traumatised halt.

In the immediate aftermath was much grace from my church, much strength from my wife and family, and much affection and support from my friends. I was helped to a road to recovery.

I have learned to be open about my experience, mostly on the off-chance that someone reading this is going through the same. I know how useful it is to know that you're not the only one to fall off that path. As a grumpy old churchwarden remarked to me on my way back to being functional, with a knowing wry look of an old bloke who's just seen a welp grow up a bit: “So, you're not as strong as you thought you were, Will.”

No, I'm not. That was the painful thing to learn. It was the most blessed thing to grasp.

Ten years later, I am well. Well, well enough. Like an old

sporting injury, it'll trigger a twinge every now and then. But the lesson remains.

Ten years and one day ago I thought I was strong. I put my shoulder under every burden. I didn't realise that there comes a point when you're not mustering your strength, you're cashing it in... and spending it.

My strength was my weakness. I was achieving outcomes according to my capacity and my skill. It wasn't nothing; I had some game. But it maxed out at the size of me. It wasn't that impressive.

Over these last ten years, I can see where the real fruit has been; the stuff that lasts, the real stuff that lingers. The sorts of things which makes you give thanks to God and trust that he's true. It's when you see lives turned around, and people baptised, and find in brothers and sisters in missional arms a fellowship that lingers across years and latitudes. It's that sort of stuff that lasts, and it's not generated by my strength.

I used to think I could exercise force of persuasion; now I know that the real stuff happens by the the Spirit touching hearts.

I used to think I could exercise strong directive leadership; now I know that the real stuff happens when good people find themselves together under the apostolic heart of Jesus.

I used to think I could, and should, fix everything and everyone I see; now I know that the real stuff happens when I wait on the Lord.

This isn't passivism or even nihilism. It's still about being present. It's still about being familiar with sufferings. There's still a need for conviction and passion and purpose and excitement. But that only works when it rests on peace. And peace comes not from my feeble strength, but knowing I am weak, and held by very strong hands.

In short: Jesus, all for Jesus, all about Jesus, all to Jesus, I surrender.

It has been a decade of weakness, beyond anything I ever asked, or imagined.

Thanks be to God.

The Location of Uncertainty and the Finding of Peace

If there is any wisdom at all in growing older (my 44th birthday next week is a timely reminder) it involves a recognition that **life is uncertain**.



There is **outward uncertainty**: I cannot control much of what happens to me. There is much about my health, wealth, and wellbeing that is outside of my plans. At some point, we all come to grips with the simple reality that life is not as we imagined it would be. We may paint a picture for the next 10, 20, or however many years we have left, but what will emerge will not be what we think. This uncertainty can create anxiety, but we must face it; it is simply the way things are.

There is **inward uncertainty**: I, *myself*, am not the person I thought I would be. Usually, I am not even the person I want to be right now. I am weaker, wearier, more broken than I imagined I would be. There is more, much more, beyond my understanding and capacity. Yes, my life's experience grows, and there is increasing familiar ground, and I have come to

“know myself” more than I did years ago. But I also have come to know that *I* am uncertain, and anything that I have, or have achieved, is grace more than it is deserved reward; I am owed nothing, given much. I cannot guarantee my own growth or stability; I have come to the end of myself too much. This uncertainty can create anxiety, but we must face ourselves; it is simply the way we are.

President Kennedy famously had on his desk a plaque a prayer taken from the words of a poem. It is a timely reminder, life is uncertain:

O God, thy sea is so great, and my boat is so small.

Uncertainty is often where we come undone. When faced with life’s uncertainty we shore up our defenses: we seek to protect ourselves and our loved ones. We scramble to control our environment. We take what is precious to us and we place it in the safest pair of hands we know: and in these lonely uncertain days, the safest hands we see are our own. The safest hands we know is the pair attached to our uncertain selves. Our external uncertainty feeds into our internal uncertainty and so it circles and accelerates until we unravel.

We seek to control our uncertainty, and so we come to the end of ourselves.

The same thing happens when it comes to religion. There’s a form of populist “faith” that seeks to reduce life’s uncertainty by trying to make life more controllable. It is found in different theological colours:

A **legalistic** form of religion seeks to simplify the game of life, and make it winnable. Life’s experience is reduced to a set of known rules: criteria for safety, commandments for victory. “Do and don’t do this, and you’ll go to heaven; mess it up and you won’t.” It’s all on *you*, but life has been made graspable, achievable, controllable. Your hands are safe.

In the image of the little boat on the big sea, it has attempted to make the boat bigger than it is.

A **relativistic** form of religion seeks to simplify the game of life, by making the game go away. Uncertainty is deflected: *you are the only reality, it's everything else that's moving*. You can't lose, because you have already won! If life feels uncertain, then reimagine it on your terms. Explore everything else as mystery, and you will find that you yourself are the certainty. Your hands are safe.

In the image of the little boat on the big sea, it has attempted to reduce the sea to a puddle.

What I see countering this is not religion, but *faith*. I don't mean "faith" in the abstract (like the way people say "he believes in the Christian faith"), but faith in the concrete sense of *trusting*. To have faith in God, is to *trust* him. **To have faith is to trust another pair of hands.** To have faith in God is to trust God's character, God's size, God's intention, God's purpose, God's word, God's present spirit.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8:35-39

What does faith do? What does trust do? **It allows the uncertainty to remain in ourselves,** and then entrusts

ourselves to the safe hands of God. Life is uncertain, but he is not. I am uncertain, but he is not. I will wobble and fail to understand, but he will not. Life will let me down, but he will not. *Nothing* will set separate us from the love of God.

Time and time again, in my life, in the lives of others, and especially in the corporate life of the church, this is the battle we face: the battle between control and faith. **Will we try and seize control, and deflect the uncertainty away;** will we reduce God to something he hasn't said, or pretend he hasn't said anything at all? **Or will we exercise faith, and entrust our uncertain selves to our trustworthy Father;** will we exercise the humility of relying on him?

In one direction lies the way of striving, where all depends on me. In the other direction lies freedom, freedom to live and move and have our being. In that direction we rest in someone bigger than ourselves. Uncertainty remains, but it is surpassed. In that direction lies peace.

*Thy sea, O God, so great,
My boat so small.
It cannot be that any happy fate
Will me befall
Save as Thy goodness opens paths for me
Through the consuming vastness of the sea.*

*Thy winds, O God, so strong,
So slight my sail.
How could I curb and bit them on the long
And saltry trail,
Unless Thy love were mightier than the wrath
Of all the tempests that beset my path?*

*Thy world, O God, so fierce,
And I so frail.
Yet, though its arrows threaten oft to pierce
My fragile mail,*

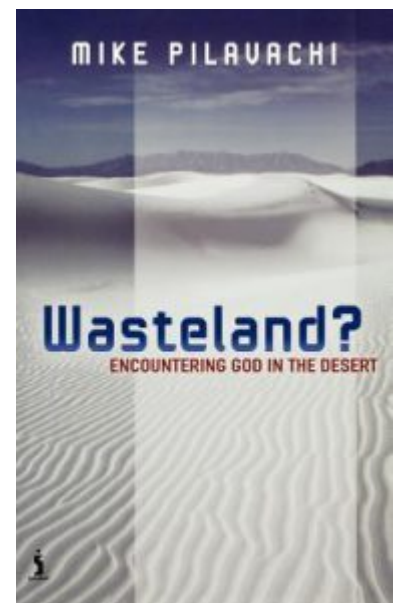
*Cities of refuge rise where dangers cease,
Sweet silences abound, and all is peace.*

– Winfred Ernest Garrison

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Review: Wasteland? – Encountering God in the Desert

I'd never really heard of Mike Pilavachi before coming to the UK. I'd vaguely heard of Soul Survivor and, to be honest, was a little sceptical, suspecting just another super-spiritual-guru-man-caricature hyping it up. Instead, I have found in my experiences over the last couple of years that there is depth to the Soul Survivor movement, and Pilavachi himself has come to intrigue me. At the front he is part bumbling oaf, part lovable uncle, sometimes authoritatively prophetic and eloquent, other times lurching from anecdote to anecdote, self-effacing and yet stepping out in naturally supernatural words of knowledge and a ministry of restoration. In some ways it seems preposterous that God could work through him a successful and influential movement that reaches 1000's of youth each year, and sustains works of justice and care across the globe.



Now here's something I've learned over the years: you can't

trust leaders who aren't dead yet. The more they are full of themselves, either in inferiority or superiority, the more they will injure, harm, or neglect. I include myself in that cohort. But those who have been through fire, who have been stripped away, who have been through wilderness and desert, and have learned to die and surrender all to God... well, I can trust them more. **They look more like Jesus and Jesus is trustworthy.**

Here's the same lesson: church leadership and the work of ministry can be either an act of self-focussed performance, or it can be an act of God-honouring worship. In his grace, God often uses both, but there is a difference. That difference comes with brokenness, suffering, and wilderness. While we ask God to bless *our* ministry, we are performing, relying on our strengths. When we are stripped away, broken, we find ourselves operating out of *weakness and dependence* in ministry shaped less by our own (sometimes impressive) capability, but by the power and purpose and presence of the Spirit of God.

I think that's what I see in Pilavachi: He's a big man, and I see a bigger God.

All of this to introduce a book I picked up at a stall while attending Soul Survivor this year. Written in 2003, this is a somewhat autobiographical insight into where Pilavachi is coming from. And it's called **Wasteland? – Encountering God in the desert.**

Here's the dynamic I'm talking about:

The great need today is for deep and authentic people... In our attempts to be 'culturally relevant' we could, if we are not careful, become as shallow as the surrounding culture... Jesus came to usher in another way. He called it the Kingdom of God... Why do we prefer to stay in the Christian ghetto where it is safe?... Yet if we are to go further into the world and make a difference instead of being yet another voice that

adds to the noise, we have to listen to the call to go on another journey, a journey into God himself. If we are to offer life instead of platitudes we need to catch more than a glimpse of glory... Specifically, if we want to move in the power of the Spirit, to live the life of the Spirit and to carry a depth of spirituality that alone can change a world, he invites us on a journey into the desert. It is sometimes a very painful journey... but it is, I believe, a necessary journey. This adventure is only for those who are committed to being a voice to and not merely another echo of society... It is only for those who are sick of superficiality both in themselves and in the church. (Pages 13-16)

The desert is a dry place. Nobody goes to the desert in search of refreshment. The desert is an inhospitable place; it is not comfortable. The desert is an incredibly silent place; there are no background noises, no distractions to lessen the pain. The desert is the place where you have to come to terms with your humanity, with your weakness and fallibility. The desert is a lonely place; there is not usually many people there. Above all, the desert is God's place; it is the place where he takes us in order to heal us. (Page 20)

This book simply unpacks this common, but often undescribed, dynamic. It is in the autobiographical content ("I wondered if God had forgotten me?", p19; **"More than anything else, when I came to the end of myself, I came to the beginning of God."**, p20 emphasis mine). And it is a common thread in his exposition of the biblical narrative ("In the desert Moses came to the end of himself. In so doing he came to the beginning of God." p29). At all times it both excites and dreads, and is therefore compelling.

I found *Wasteland?* to be personally challenging. Ministry life is not easy, and can often feel like a desert. Pilavachi has helped me in my own reflection and crying out. For instance,

he writes that “dependence and intimacy are the two major lessons we learn in the desert” (p22). Over the last few years I’ve learned a lot about dependence, but I know I need to learn more about *intimacy* with the Lord who is near to me, even if I can’t tell that he is there, even if he is setting my heart on fire. Pilavachi speaks of being determined to “seek God for himself whether I had ministry or not” (p21) and I know I need this example. He gives the forthright truth, “life’s a bitch, but God is good” (p79) and I must face my resentment, and the pain of knowing that that truth applies to church life just as much as any other domain. I am encouraged to continue “plodding” (p86).

The book certainly makes for insightful reflection. I do have a slight question as to whether it would always be helpful to someone who might be in the midst of their wilderness. After all, it’s very easy to slip into the despondency of (unfair) comparison: “It’s easy for him to write, he’s come through it, he’s a successful famous Christian!”. And sometimes the descriptions don’t totally match what someone might be experiencing: for instance, the wilderness is not always a “place where he slows us down” (p43), I have found it can also be something that feels like a dangerous jungle, a place of anxiety and fear. These concerns are only minor though.

The aspect I most appreciate is how the book has a prophetic character, speaking truth to the church, the church of the West in particular. Consider this provocative truth:

*When we turn from the spring of living water, we try to satisfy ourselves from any contaminated pool. We then become contaminated and diseased. Instead of seeking healing, we live in denial that there is anything wrong. The desert is a place of healing. Before that, however, it has to be the place where we discover that we are sick. When all the props are taken away we come face to face with our bankruptcy. **The gospel has to be bad news before it can be good news.** In the desert we find that we are ‘wretched, pitiful, poor, blind*

and naked (Revelation 3:17). Only then can we truly receive the Saviour. It is very dry and arid in the desert. Only when we truly thirst can we begin to drink the living water. (Page 43, emphasis mine).

*This is the antidote to a faith that owes more to Western consumerism than to the word of God. **It is out of suffering and death that life comes.** If we have not learned that from the cross of Jesus, what have we learned? (Page 83, emphasis mine).*

The lessons he draws from the Song of Songs are profound as he speaks of the longing of the Beloved seeking her Lover. If we resist being moved by the presence of God (which we do), how much more do we resist being moved by a sense of his absence? We would often rather numb out and muddle along in our own strength.

Sadly, for some Christians, for those who have never known themselves as the 'beloved', his presence is not missed. It is business as usual. I heard someone ask once, 'If the Holy Spirit left your church, would anyone notice?' The desert sorts out the spiritual men from the boys. [Like the Beloved in the Song of Songs], will we walk the streets until we find him in a deeper way, will we choose to sit in the desert until we hear him speaking tenderly to us? Or will we take the easy option?... God is not interested in a 'satisfactory working relationship' with his people. The passionate God wants a love affair with his church. A love so strong that we know we could never live without him. The desert is God's means of taking us to that place. (Page 52)

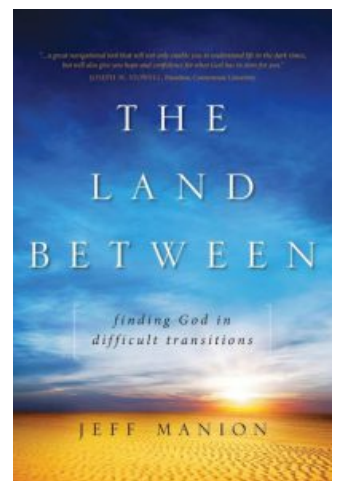
This is an "if only" book. "If only" I could get the spirit of this book into the heart of the church at large. We are so formulaic, pulling programs off the shelf, often to avoid our wasteland by busyness or some self-made productivity. Yet in the wilderness, we can be made into a "voice, not an echo"

(p57), a people that can speak the gospel from depth to depth. This is what changes lives. This is what changes the world.

I have learned to consider prospective church leaders with the question “How dead are they?” I have regretted it when I have gone past that question too quickly. I have regretted it when I haven’t asked that question of myself. Pilavachi puts it this way: “I am wary of trusting any leader who does not walk with a limp” (p87). In many ways he is a Christian superstar, with big lights, big tents, and big band... but his limp is obvious. In this book it becomes a provocation, exhortation, and encouragement for all of us. I have come to really appreciate the whole Mike Pilavachi, Soul Survivor thing, with all its chaotic, messy, haphazard, space where God is so often manifestly present. It is that blessing, because of a limp.

Review: The Land Between – Finding God in Difficult Transitions

I’m writing this seated under a large sycamore tree in an English country churchyard, surrounded by lush green fields, waving crops, and comfortable houses. In my time I have had quiet times in many places like this, under random trees, at cafe tables, on picturesque Tasmanian beaches, or buffeted on a mountain by cloud-bearing winds.



Each place is a different context, each season is a different

time, but I have found that each place has often been, spiritually speaking, a place of *wilderness*, a *deserted place* where (as I wrote to our then church many years ago) we are “laid bare before God... It is there that we are convicted of sin, assured of forgiveness, comforted, guided, and can consider the wisdom of God at work. It is there that we are matured, helped, strengthened...”

Wilderness is integral to the Christian journey. As we grow to be more like Jesus (what theologians call “sanctification”) we find that we must necessarily pass through a desert experience. These are seasons that are never easy, often protracted, and invariably marked by encounters with hurt, grief, and mortification.

I’ve recently come across *The Land Between: Finding God in Difficult Transitions*, by Jeff Manion, and found it to be not only a decent description of this phenomenon, but also a companion, a textual spiritual director, for those who are plodding such paths at the moment. He understands that wildernesses are *crucial* times, the crux of things in life.

I firmly believe that the Land Between – that space where we feel lost or lonely or deeply hurt – is fertile ground for our spiritual transformation and for God’s grace to be revealed in magnificent ways. But while the Land Between is prime real estate for faith transformation, it is also the space where we can grow resentful, bitter, and caustic if our responses are unguarded. The wilderness where faith can thrive is the very desert where it can dry up and die” (Page 19)

Manion has us reflect on the Israelite’s wilderness in the time of Moses and, in particular, focuses in on the *complaints* that are voiced.

One form of complaint is the **bitter complaint**. We all complain when the going gets tough, and the going was tough

for the multitude in the Sinai desert. Even as they became recipients of daily divine manna they complained. And we can identify with their frustration: “I’m sick of this! I’m sick of this season!” It is not abstract, as Manion demonstrates, and is manifest in our own situations. It’s certainly a refrain that’s been on my lips:

“I’m sick of living in my in-laws’ basement.”

“I’m sick of being asked what line of work I’m in and fumbling for an answer.”

“I’m sick of enduring wave after wave of medical tests without a clear diagnosis.”

“I’m sick of waiting for this depression to lift.”

“I’m sick of visiting a mother in a nursing home who repeatedly asks who I am.”

“I’m sick of this manna”

(Page 36)

To illustrate the second form of complaint, Manion turns to the “exhausted rant” of Moses in *Numbers 11:11-15* where he hurls forth questions like “Why have you brought this trouble on your servant? Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms?... If this is how you are going to treat me, put me to death right now.” Despite the volatility of it, this is **faithful complaint**.

This sounds more like an exasperated meltdown than a prayer. You might say it sounds a little like the complaining Israelites in some respects – the despair, the frustration, the giving up, Moses’ dismissal of his calling, the reference to death. But there is a key difference: Moses’ attitude toward God. The Israelites are complaining about God. Moses is praying to God, and this is a huge distinction... He is not spiraling into spiteful complaint but is candidly pouring his heart out to God. He has maxed out and is in over his head. He is running on fumes. (Page 65)

Every admirable person I know has been in that place. They are emotionally honest with God (page 70, page 86). Every person I know who has not yet fully entered into their calling, those who exercise leadership with a degree of immaturity, have not had this wilderness experience, they lack “experiential knowledge” (page 120) and have no words. They are unstripped, still full of themselves, unemptied, proto-kenotic, with faith soft and untested.

In response to faithful complaint, Manion paraphrases God’s heart:

*“See you’re not alone. Some of my choice servants have felt intense failure and frustration. This is how they prayed when they felt empty and exhausted, and this is how I Invite you to pray. My shoulds are strong enough to absorb rants like this. **But please speak! Cry out! Face me and give voice to your fatigue, your pain, your betrayal, your vast disappointment. Turn toward me and begin the conversation, even if it’s raw and ugly.**” (Page 74, emphasis mine)*

Wilderness brings us to the crux and puts before us the question that clarifies faith (page 55): Who will we trust?

Who will we trust with our past? Who will we trust with our future (page 52)? Will we attempt to take over and control? Or will we learn to bring ourselves to the presence and leadership of God? The wilderness doesn’t just *teach* faith, it *grows* it. In the wilderness, “God demonstrates that he is a capable provider for his people. What is he attempting to teach them as he leads them into dire hardship? ‘I am worthy of your trust. You need to learn to depend on me’” (Page 44).

The complacent avoid it. The bitter resent it. They turn from God: “We were better off without you as our rescuer, we were better off without your presence, we were better off as slaves... This is serious.” (Page 138). And it is real. I have seen people echo this sentiment in their lives, in their

churches!

But in his leading Moses and his people through the valley of death, God isn't capricious or attempting to build a co-dependency. He is growing them, making them ready. He is *maturing them, strengthening them*. "Once they enter the Promised Land, they are going to have to resist looking to the likes of the god Baal for water, food, and survival" (Page 45). The wilderness is necessary for them to *be* the people of God, distinct and reflecting his life-giving ways.

The fruit of faith is life's vocation: As the power of self-centredness dies in the desert, the power of sin, the ways of the world in maintaining and holding on to power and self-security, loose their grip. We learn to "cast our cares on the Lord" (page 83), where their hold and power on the soul is extinguished. We cast our cares as we learn to ask "How long, oh Lord?" (Page 84).

I only have one issue with Manion's exposition and application: At times we get a whiff of a positive thinking gospel:

"A heart of bitter complaint is anchored in the suspicion that God is stingy – that he will hold out on you. But a heart of trust is anchored in the belief that God is good and will provide for you out of an inexhaustible reservoir of generosity. Your expectation of God's provision will prove a determining factor in whether the Land Between results in spiritual life or spiritual death. Your trust in his future goodness keeps hope alive as you journey through the desert" (Page 99).

There is truth in this statement: Yes, faith holds to the goodness of God's character. However, we cannot make that faith contingent on having needs (or even wants) met according to expectation. Yes, we can hold to the eventual generous provision of the Promised Land of eternal life. But the heart

of faith is not, "I will trust in God because he will eventually give me what I cry out for", rather as with *Job*, "Even though he slay me, yet will I hope in him." His ways are perfect, even if they are beyond understanding, or have only the rich and healthy received the fruit of their faith?

Gill and I spoke with a wise, older, vicar recently. He was describing his breakdown, the wilderness that he had experienced in a season in his life. And he said words to this effect: "I've learned to turn towards the pain. I don't like it, I don't want to. But only there is life, when God works in my weakness, and there is fruit in the labour." For better or for worse, Gill and I have glimpsed what he means. Our resolve is to not waste the pain. To turn towards it and to trust God even when all appears as despair and abandonment. To do otherwise is to slip into bitterness, or to reach again for the numbness of worldly torpor.

Manion quotes Yancey, "Life is difficult. God is merciful. Heaven is sure." (Page 175). I would add to that the words of the incomparable John Schlitt who looks to the cross and sings, "I know who I am, I know where I've been, I know sometimes love takes the hard way... For now, forever, I take my stand, I place my whole life in Your hands..."

I know who He is, I know where He's been, I know that love takes the hard way.

On Drooping and Tottering

Just a short reflection from one of those mornings when God seems distant and despondency seems close. I have learned over the years that such moments are cues to run towards Jesus, *no matter how much you don't feel like doing that*. And so I turned to where I'm up to in my readings, which happened to be Hebrews 12.



Hebrews 12 is all about how God in his love *disciplines* his people. It applies to times of trial, adversity, difficulty, despondency. “Endure trials for the sake of discipline,” it says, “God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline?” (Heb 12:7 NIV)

Which, in and of itself, can feel of no great immediate encouragement. Although I have come to know over the years that it is true, that “discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (Heb 12:11 NIV), what does that mean for the immediate moment?

That I should just wallow until it's over?

But Hebrews 12 *does* have an imperative in it, a true exhortation that hadn't really seized me before. It's in verses 12 and 13. Let me quote it using the Complete Jewish Bible (CJB) version, because it makes it very clear:

So, strengthen your drooping arms, and steady your tottering knees; and make a level path for your feet; so that what has been injured will not get wrenched out of joint but rather will be healed. (Heb 12:12-13 CJB)

This is an exhortation that looks towards the fruits of the discipline: Strengthen yourself, steady yourself, level off your path. These are both self-caring exhortations and

looking-ahead and keep-moving exhortations. They are exhortations that recognise that the *hurt* and the *injury* of the season is real. Something has been *injured* (the NIV talks about that which has become *lame*) and now the task is to move forward in a way that will allow it to heal and not be wrenched out of joint and possibly permanently damaged.

The chapter then goes on to talk about avoiding bitterness and living in peace with one another: the exact sort of thing that would cause an injury to fester.

Today this is encouragement. Despondency can be real. But by God's grace it is not devoid of purpose. And there is a constructive task which is both valid and graspable: to *steady myself, move forward* and so embrace healing. God is good.

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Snippet: Why Do So Many Pastors Leave the Ministry? The Facts Will Shock You

Link shared on facebook on Jan 30, 2014

Makes you think...

Mind you, there are plenty of pros to go with the cons of this enigmatic, strange, unpredictable job!



Why Do So Many Pastors Leave the Ministry? The Facts Will Shock You

www.expastors.com

A few years after I had left the ministry, a co-worker came and asked if I wouldn't mind talking and praying for her friend who was going through a challenging time. I wasn't a pastor any longer – ...

Snippet: Emotional 'sins' of highly driven people | Christian Reflections | Blogs | Geneva Push

Link shared on facebook on Sep 17, 2013

Yep.



Emotional 'sins' of highly driven people | Christian Reflections | Blogs | Geneva Push

feedly.com

Geneva Push is an Australian church planting network equipping a new generation of church planters with churchplanting resources, advice and support.

R U OK? I wasn't.

Today is R U OK? Day. We've all seen the ads with Hugh Jackman. The concept is simple – take a moment to look your friend or co-worker in the eye and ask them “Are you OK?” It may not be necessary, but it does no harm. But it can do a lot of good, as my friend Sally Oakley, blogs, and asks “Well, are you?”



It is also rather poignant for me because a year ago today, I wasn't OK. On the afternoon of September 15 2010 I went to bed and couldn't stop crying. I call it my “crash.” It was “burn out”, a “nervous breakdown” – whatever you call it it was the fruit of mismanaging self-made expectations, working too hard, too long, not listening to my own body when it was sick, nor to my wife in her ever-present wisdom. Above all it came from forgetting the core purpose of my existence – to worship and glorify God through faith, trust and hope.

Last year I needed more than just the question (although that may have helped), I needed to heed the statement: “U R not OK.” But I didn't.

This is not the place to tell the details of the story.

Suffice it to say that there has been much grace from many people – not least of which was Gill, and Josh Skeat and many others at Connections and the Parish of Burnie teams who stepped up as I fell down. God, in his grace, switched off my brain and made me rest. He taught me how to worship again, in weakness and utter dependence. He met me through gardening, through sleeping, through moving concrete and walks on the

beach. He ministered to me through doctors and counsellors and the wisdom of those who are my leaders in the church. He ministered to me through the soothing truths of my wife's words and affections. I think I learned a lot.

I am now OK.

Some of you are not OK.

Some of you, if I asked the question would answer falsely – with bravado, or assurances, or caveats. Perhaps you need to hear a statement then: U R not OK – you have lost your first love, you are running on empty, that performance-giving stress is about to cause the fuse to blow.

If this is you. If you are where I was...

Please stop. Take the time-out now. Don't fall off the edge. Don't give an excuse. This must be your priority. Because a crash costs. It costs you. And it costs, very dearly, the ones who are near to you. Go to a doctor. Take some advice. Don't let the diminishing returns spiral out of control.

If you can't stop. If it's "too late" in some sense. Please hear this: even though you are not OK, *you*, as a person, are much much much more than OK. No matter how you feel. Or where you are at. Or what people are saying. This does not change God's love for you, his grace towards you. He is your refuge. You are safe there. Trust, simply trust.

Hear the heart of Christ, described as the servant in Isaiah 42:3

*A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.*

Follow Friday

My friend Sally Oakley has started a blog at <http://oakleythoughtso.blogspot.com/>

She writes

A bit of a working title. It's an idea James and I have had, to write (perhaps together?) about our experiences of depression. It sounds depressing, I know, but the idea would be to make it extremely practical and readable; something that anyone could pick up and get something out of. Anyone who would like to know more about depressive illness, parenting, marriage, and surviving all three. And all the bits in between.

Looking forward to it.