

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.

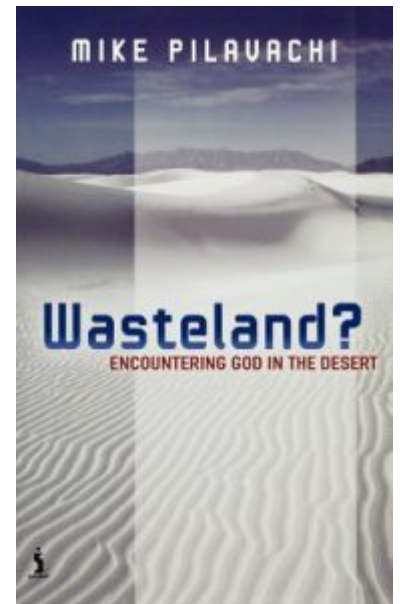
There's no doubt about it, Naturally Supernatural is not the same experience as a silent retreat. But in this week I've seen something of the depths of spirituality that are common to both the charismatic and the contemplative. I knew it intellectually, and I've seen it in Gill (who is years ahead of 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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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.

Remembering Jesus: Soul Survivor and Sacramental Singing



We've just been to Soul Survivor. For the uninitiated, it's a Christian youth festival, held as five separate weeks in various places around the UK. We went to the last week in Shepton Mallet, Somerset together

as a family with our church youth group and with 6,500 other people.

It was fantastic. Uplifting, moving, healing, restorative, life-giving, fun, peaceful, worshipful.

But I had an initial concern that it would be all about the hype and the froth. I had had a passing observation of Soul leader, Mike Pilavachi, and he has, shall we say, a *large* personality. Would the big top and the light show make it just another spiritualised buzz for young people, to dry up like the mud in the fields as the tents are pulled down and the cars drive away?

It wasn't like that. While rightly being the centre of attention at times, Mike, when it mattered, constantly put the attention back to Jesus. He was not afraid to turn off the light show and simply ask people to pray in quietness. People weren't asked to come forward to receive ministry from the big holy guru, but to simply to pray for and care for one another.

I saw people moved with contrition, with love, with peace, with joy.

And there *was* music. Lots of it. Some loud, some repetitive, some light, some profound. It carried people away without getting carried away, if you know what I mean. And while the lyrics were not 18th Century theological treatises, they were meaningful and biblical.

It reprised me with an ongoing thought I've had about charismatic worship of this kind, the sort that's done well.

What does it *do*?

Firstly, it expresses an obedience to the Scriptural injunction to build one another up with "*songs, hymns, and spiritual songs*" and to "*sing and make music from your heart to the Lord.*"

Secondly, there is a sense of expectation that this form of worship is an *effective* means of encountering the grace of God in particular, life-giving ways. This is the charismatic sense in which the worship incorporates prayer, healing, restoration, and a growing intimacy with the Holy Spirit.

These are two marks that characterise sacraments. The two canonical Sacraments of the Lord's Supper and Baptism are done in obedience and are an effective administration of God's grace. We encounter God in the Sacraments, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Musical worship is *not* a Sacrament, but in this sense it is *sacramental*. In the midst of musical worship we can encounter the grace of God in a particular way as the Holy

Spirit ministers to us.

What struck me at Soul Survivor however, was another aspect of this. The two Sacraments also have the characteristic of being a *memorial*, in the broad sense of the word of “an aid to memory.” Jesus commands that the breaking of the bread and the pouring of the wine and the sharing together should be done “*in remembrance of me.*”

As I watched over six thousand young people singing about Jesus it was clear, by this they were *remembering* him, and they were remembering who they are *in* him. It was truly a memorial. It was kerygmatic. It was a connection with and a proclamation of the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

And my prayer is this: that as the young people dispersed into their year, that they would take the remembering of these songs, this worship experience, with them. In whatever stresses and strains they experience, that they would be led to *remember Christ* there, away from the big top, in the midst of reality. That they would do life *in remembrance of him*, and so bear much fruit for his glory. Amen.