

Fellowship of Word and Spirit Conference 2009
MAINTAINING HOPE IN SUFFERING

Introduction

I think the original title for this session was meant to be Maintaining Hope in Ministry, but somewhere along the line I felt I had to change the title because the last three years have been years of ministry in the midst of suffering. In May 2008 my wife, Eluned, died after a long illness with cancer. These three years have been about struggle and pain, about bereavement and loss and about great joy and delight as well and doing ministry but much more significantly in many ways they've been about God, dealing with God, coming to terms with God and yes, delighting in God.

That journey has provoked some really big questions – do we really believe what we say we believe about God, about life and death and the future because if we're honest there's sometimes precious little evidence that we do. What do we actually believe when we say God is sovereign, and if as Reformed Christians we believe that why don't we teach it or at least teach it without feeling we somehow have to apologize? What does it mean as a Christian to die well and how can we teach that and model that for the people God has entrusted to our care? Where do we find hope in the face of suffering, in God, in God's promises, yes but how can we lay hold of that hope when physically, emotionally and perhaps spiritually we are at our weakest? Lots of questions, big questions and I hope this evening to at least point toward some of the answers that I've found though realizing at the same time that we can't possibly cover everything there is to say about the sovereignty of God, suffering, death and the mystery of providence.

I have to confess I've had lots of help and if in anything I say you detect the influence of John Piper, Alec Motyer and others you are almost certainly correct.

I am conscious though that there will be those here who have themselves been through great suffering and each one of us is different so I do pray that nothing I say will deepen your wounds but only serve to heal.

And I'm also conscious that I don't give the impression that Eluned and I are in any sense heroic models to follow, these have been years of real struggle and many stumbles and it's still continuing and looking back to the mini journal I kept for the first few months after Eluned died – some days it simply says 'lost the plot!', so please remember that.

A Brief History

For the benefit of those who don't know our story let me give you some background.

I first met Eluned at university in 1975 at which point she was coming to the end of treatment for Hodgkin's Disease which is a cancer of the lymph system. 18 months before doctors had given her only months to live but as friends in her church and in Girl Crusader Union prayed God was pleased to bring healing, one of the early successes of new radio and chemo therapy treatments. However for us things were always uncertain.

I remember just before we got married in 1977 a consultant telling us, he could give no guarantees about the future either about Eluned's health or whether we could have children. We headed for Trinity, Bristol and then to a 5 year curacy in West Bromwich but always living with uncertainty, twice she ended up with spells in hospital with glandular fever and meningitis the result of a damaged immune system, but Fiona was born.

Off as vicar to Riseley, in Bedfordshire and Hugh was born, Fiona and Hugh, gifts of God despite everything.

Then 1989, Eluned is in hospital again, a virus sends her heart hay wire, it takes almost 6 months to recover, but God restores her.

1996 she is diagnosed with breast cancer, surgery and chemo follow and once again God is pleased to restore her but that's followed in 1999 by the discovery, following months of severe headaches, of a sub arachnoid cyst on the brain, nothing to do with the cancer. Surgery follows and God restores.

2005 we move to Hailsham in East Sussex. Both of us convinced that God is calling us to this new challenge and yet both of us also strangely apprehensive, yet at the time we don't share those fears. On the day we move I sense something is not right and she tells me she has gone back to her doctor, a lymph node in her neck is swollen.

A recurrence of breast cancer is diagnosed, hormone treatment follows and we continue to the following summer when Eluned suffers severe chest pain, after some months it is confirmed that there is cancer affecting her lung. Chemo follows. The pain goes, there's some improvement. The Royal Marsden suggest there are now two cancers at work the original breast cancer spread to the lymph system and an unrelated lung cancer and that both are most likely to have been caused by the aggressive radiotherapy treatment given to treat Hodgkins 30 years before.

Summer 2007, more chemo, very debilitating, and then yet more chemo and Christmas 2007 we decide enough is enough – in May Eluned died though 5 weeks before she'd been at New Word Alive, 7 days before at a wedding back in Riseley, 2 days before had a takeaway with Wallace and Lindsay, great joy and amusement because Wallace was off to meet the Pope!

That's the bare outline of what happened but actually life was hardly ever, even towards the end, dominated by illness. Yes, it made us much more apprehensive whenever Eluned had anything more than a cold but I think that that very uncertainty made us always that much more conscious of eternity – so no bad thing. No life was dominated not by illness but by seeking to serve Christ in family and church.

In fact Eluned always played down her suffering, it was never significant and rarely an issue perhaps because over the years she developed a quiet but huge confidence in the sovereignty of God while being thoroughly realistic about life. She would echo the groaning of Romans 8, 'life is a bummer' she would say 'and sometimes it's a lot worse' but always with the assurance of the God of Romans 8, utterly sovereign.

So what do we really need to know about God?

I've been challenged recently reading Piper's latest book, 'Spectacular Sins and their Global Purpose in the Glory of Christ'. Piper is primarily dealing with the issue of evil but I think his comments are equally apposite in respect of suffering.

Quote : Spectacular Sins – The Times are Changing p.13

'The coddled western world will sooner or later give way to great affliction. And when it does, whose vision of God will hold? Where are Christians being prepared for great global sorrows? Where is the Christian mind and soul being prepared for the horrors to come? Christians in the west are weakened by wimpy worldviews. And wimpy worldviews make wimpy Christians. God is weightless in our lives. He is not terrifyingly magnificent. His sovereignty is secondary (at best) to his sensitivity.

Piper is writing with great concern as he sees very tough times indeed ahead for the church but he makes the point that that is equally true for the individual Christian who will sooner or later face calamity in their own lives and for the day when that happens what is it we need to know about our God? Let me quote Piper again,

Ibid p.28 *'It is not my calling to help you to have chipper feelings while the whole of creation groans. My job is to put the kind of ballast in the belly of your boat so that when these waves crash against your life, you will not capsize but make it to the harbour of heaven – battered and wounded but full of faith and joy'.*

We need to know that

1. God is God

Surely that has to be our starting point and anything we subsequently say or think must acknowledge that reality and cause us to humble ourselves before him with reverence and honour, praise and worship and most especially the reality that He is utterly sovereign, utterly reliable and utterly lovable beyond our imaginings. So the Westminster Confession speaks .. *'There is but one only living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute, working all things according to the counsel of his own immutable and most righteous will, for his own glory; most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth ..'* (WC Chap 2:1)

2. God is good, He is the God of all comfort

I guess that's where we are strongest in preparing people to cope with suffering, reminding them that God is good, that He loves them, cares for them, that He is not distant, not absent but *'a very present help in trouble'*. The Good Shepherd who cares for the sheep, the God who feels our pain, as Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus, as He was indignant and angry in the face of the death of someone he loved. The God who is acquainted with grief, familiar with suffering, the God who suffers and dies because He loves us. People need to know that. He is the *'God of all comfort'* (2 Cor.1:3), the God *'who comforts the downcast'* (2 Cor. 7:6). And

whatever else we have to say about the way God works we must never lose sight of this, the answer to our calamities is never that God has become a vengeful tyrant for in all He does *'The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love'* (Psalm 103:8)

3. God is faithful

Again we are familiar with reminding people of the promises of God, assuring them that He is faithful to keep his promises. The words of Joshua, *'You know in your hearts and souls that not one word has failed of all the good things that the Lord your God promised concerning you. All have come to pass for you; not one of them has failed'* (Joshua 23:14)

God has set out in Scripture the track record of His faithfulness in the past and we rightly apply that to his continuing promises, *'I will never leave you, nor forsake you'* (Hebrews 13:5). We rightly assure ourselves and one another that *'in all things God works for the good of those who love Him'* (Romans 8:28, NIV) and we set before us our future hope, *'For this is the will of my Father'*, says Jesus, *'that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in Him shall have eternal life and I will raise him up on the last day'* (John 6:40).

We need to know that God is good and God is faithful and we need to remind one another of that but what I want to suggest is that that is not enough. When we're being battered by the storm, when we're utterly confused about what God is doing and suffering and evil appear to be triumphant and when none of the promises of God seem to speak to me in my situation I think we need to dig deeper behind the promises of God to the character and nature of God and in particular to the sovereignty of God, which should in no way surprise as Reformed Christians.

So we need to know that

4. God is sovereign

I do think we need to find ways to teach ourselves and our people that God is sovereign. He is actively sovereign over and intimately involved in directing the affairs of his world. He knows all things in advance because He, according to His own purpose, brings them about. That means God is sovereign over evil and suffering as well though without ever being their cause. But I wonder if we don't sometimes find ourselves almost apologizing for God's sovereignty as if we were embarrassed by it, not something Paul was tempted to do, *'Who are you, O man, to answer back to God?'* Remember Romans 9:20

Now this means we're saying not just that God can use this bad situation, or that He allows it or permits it but that this bad situation is in some sense from God. He knows it, He can stop it, that He doesn't must mean it is in some sense part of His purpose; that He does not stop it is for a reason. That means that for us it cannot be second best. As we'll see from these Scriptures that doesn't mean there aren't immediate and secondary causes in our experience but that behind all is the determined will of our all gracious God.

The Scriptures see the hand of God behind everything, so the writer of Job at the end of Job's journey of suffering doesn't give Satan even a mention but says this, *'his brothers and sisters showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the Lord had brought upon him'* (Job 42:11)

Notice that the message of Job doesn't in any way minimize the pain but it does recognize the hand of the Lord behind everything. God is sovereign over suffering.

Or take the example of Amaziah, King of Judah (2 Chronicles 25), he'd won a victory over Edom so he decided to stir up trouble with the northern kingdom of Israel under Joash. Now Joash counsels him to stay at home but Amaziah will hear not of it. Why not?

Because of his pride, yes; because Satan was pursuing division among God's people, almost certainly yes, but the Bible says, v.20, *'Amaziah would not listen, for it was of God, in order that He might give them into the hand of their enemies'*. God is sovereign over evil.

Or Joseph, what took Joseph as a slave to Egypt? His brothers' betrayal, certainly; but ultimately it is the design of God through which to save His people. They intended it for harm but God intended it for good. (Genesis 50:20)

Or of course the supreme example is the cross. Luke tells us *'Satan entered into Judas'* (Luke 22:3), John tells us Judas was a thief (John 12:6) both guilty, yet behind it all, but in no way responsible for the sin, the hand of God. The gospels keep telling us that, but it is clearest of course in Acts 4, Herod and Pilate conspired together, *'they did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen'* (v.28, NIV). *'It was the will of the Lord to bruise Him'*, (Isaiah 53:10)

The powerful message of the Bible is that there is only one God, which means that the 'buck' stops with Him, He is sovereign.

That's what we believe and we must not downsize God to cope with suffering in some vain believe that that will make it easier. Downsize God and we take away our hope and our assurance. However, we need to apply that and teach that **before** the waves crash over us so that when they do we will have strength to stand and because when the waves do crash we may not be fit to hear it. One consideration, however, how far do we think the language of 'sovereignty' is helpful or unhelpful today?

Here's Alec Motyer in his latest book, 'Journey', commenting on Psalm 125 and Isaiah 42:24, *'It is always the best and safest course to assume that the Lord knows what he is doing, though it is not necessarily the easiest line to take!*

*Who handed Jacob over to become loot,
And Israel to the plunderers?*

Was it not the Lord? (Isaiah 42)

Motyer adds, *'Ask that question, listen to the answer, and begin to feel safe, no matter what the trial. By-pass the people who are talking about 'Satan getting in' – he can only do what he is directed and allowed to do. Go straight to the top. No one can pluck us out of his hand! That's where we were when trouble struck, that's where we are for all time and eternity. We live in the hand that appoints our experiences and our destiny, and which controls our daily circumstances. This is not a problem; it is a fact; it is also the softest pillow on which to lay our heads. Our God is really and truly God' (Journey, page 62)*

So let me try to apply that to the issue of suffering.

i. Our suffering is from God

We need to help one another to see that what God permits He permits for a reason and that reason is His design. Sin is not ultimate, Satan is not ultimate but God is!

Evil and suffering are allowed to exist in this world only because God has ordained them as a necessary part of His plan and He controls their extent and their purpose. Yes, we've seen in those previous examples that there may often be secondary causes and other plans at work but we cannot escape the truth, and why should we want to, that God is sovereign. Absolute. Full stop.

So what is God's purpose in evil and suffering? We have to recognize that suffering and death are demonstrations of God's judgement on a rebellious world, not just the natural outworkings of the way the world is, but demonstrations of God's just and perfect judgement. It was He who subjected creation to futility that we might understand the true horror of our own sin, the utter wickedness and corruption of this broken world.

Secondly, God's purpose is ultimately about the destruction of evil and death, God uses evil to judge evil and ultimately to destroy evil.

And thirdly God's purpose through suffering, death and the apparent triumph of evil is to display to the whole universe the glory of Jesus Christ.

So we cannot and must not distance God from suffering.

As Job replies to his wife, *'Shall we receive good at the hand of the Lord and shall we not receive evil'* (Job 2:10, NIV)

Isaiah carries the same message, *'I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no GodI form light and I create darkness, I make well being and I create calamity, I am the LORD who does all these things'* (Isaiah 45:5-7)

Now however tough this may sound isn't it also hugely comforting that the God who ordains all things for us has a purpose and is the God who holds us in his hands, secured for eternity because of the limitless love with which He has already showered us through the death of His own Son.

ii. Our suffering is designed for our sanctifying and for the display of God's glory

Now as Christians we share in the sufferings of our world, we too suffer those things which are part of God's judgement against our wickedness and yet for the Christian that suffering has a different purpose. It is not for us about judgement. Remember, *'there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus'* (Romans 8:1), *'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law'*, (Galatians 3:13).

Therefore no suffering or pain we experience as Christians is judgement in that sense which means it must be something else. Think of Israel coming out of Egypt before their rebellion, to paraphrase Alec Motyer's words, why does God turn them left instead of right, why the long way not the short way, why the desert route and not the tourist route?

God led them that way to teach them and prepare for their new land.

We suffer as the world suffers but for us it means something radically different. Significantly Hebrews 12 tells us it is a sign of God's fatherly love and discipline, and a discipline designed to tear us away from our sin, *'He disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness', 'the holiness without which no-one will see the Lord (v.10, 14)*. God's aim is our transformation, that we might share both his holiness and his glory and for that the consistent pattern is through suffering. Meanwhile James 1 tells us that our suffering is about God's purpose to mature us through perseverance, 1 Peter tells us that it is that our faith may be so refined as to result in glory, honour and praise to Jesus, Romans 8 tells us it is about preparing for glory, to be transformed into the likeness of His Son. All of which tells me that my suffering is in some way for my eternal blessing but even more about the eternal praise of my great Saviour Jesus. I think the cross makes it clear doesn't it that the ultimate purpose of all suffering is the revelation of the glory of God's grace in Jesus Christ and through that grace the creation of a new people whose hope and joy and supreme contentment is Jesus, now in the midst of suffering and then in the glory of God's new creation. So there is a purpose to our suffering, God does stand behind it, He is involved in it and though suffering is never in itself 'good', it is, in the mystery of providence, for our blessing.

Listen to Spurgeon

'There is no attribute of God more comforting to His children than the doctrine of divine sovereignty. Under the most adverse circumstances, in the most severe troubles, they believe that Sovereignty hath ordained their afflictions, that Sovereignty overrules them, and that Sovereignty will sanctify them all' (Sermons Preached and Revised Vol. 1 BOT)

In his online paper, 'Don't Waste your Cancer', Piper says believe your cancer is not a curse but a gift. I think Eluned and I emotionally found it very difficult to bring ourselves to say that word 'gift' but in our hearts we knew, it was for us, from our loving Father, for our eternal blessing and that Jesus might be praised.

We need to teach that in the hand of God our suffering is for a purpose.

iii. Our suffering is designed to lead us to ask, 'what is God teaching us?'

However we will need to help people appreciate that very often God offers us no particular explanation for our suffering beyond the explanation He has already given us in the Bible. It is experience without explanation. In other words there are no specific answers to our questions as to why God has chosen this path for us. Or put it another way, 'I can accept Lord you have a purpose, but why now, Lord, and why this way and couldn't you have done it some other way?' However, as we've seen, we can say with confidence that God has a purpose, that purpose is about maturing our faith and changing us to be like Jesus so we should be asking not 'why?' but 'what?'. What are you teaching me, Lord? How are you changing me? It's a basic question we need to ask, what is God wanting me to learn through this? How is He wanting me to change and grow? And at the heart of His teaching that we should learn to rely on Him, a mature and confident faith.

Paul says, *'We felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on the God who raise the dead'*. (2 Corinthians 1:9).

Indeed that we should grow to delight in him, in Piper's words to 'treasure Christ' above all things.

I think it is important in suffering to remember that, it can be easy to dwell, for example with cancer, on percentage survival rates or side effects of treatment and while they can be important in weighing up treatment options we can't rely on them, the only cast iron certainty is God.

A hymn like 'Be still my soul' sets it right we are 100% guaranteed to suffer and 100% guaranteed the presence and comfort, love and joy of Jesus.

So while He may have designed this hard road for us, it is always out of love, and always for our good and always that we should grow mature and taste the real contentment and satisfaction of His grace.

But we will need to help one another to ask the question and not just in the storm, what is God teaching me today?

iv. Our suffering is designed to lead us to pray

We need to help people see that, if suffering is from the Lord, it is to the Lord that they need go. There never any comfort in distancing ourselves from God. We should pray, pray for God's help and we should not be afraid to pray for healing. Surely the Bible shows both God the healer and God the sustainer of his people. So just because we call ourselves Reformed shouldn't stop us praying for healing but with proviso that we understand that God will equally

bring glory to Jesus through the grace that keeps the sufferer treasuring Christ as through the grace that heals.

But I think it's also very important to say that **now** is primarily a time of perseverance in suffering (Romans 8) again, that that is our normal experience and only **then** will it be the day of new bodies made perfect like His glorious body.

And when very often we don't know how to pray, should we pray for example for a Christian loved one to be healed or for God to take them home which is far better, don't be discouraged for again Romans 8 assures us that the Spirit groans with us, interceding for us with the prayers we should be praying.

iv. Our suffering is designed to lead us to consider death

Suffering is surely one of God's ways of reminding us of our mortality, and mortality, death, reminds of sin. Yet death is rarely on our agenda. In our churches we can spend a lot of our ministry talking about children, families, marriage, work, but how often do we talk about preparing for death or what happens when we die. Apart from Alec's book 'After Death' there are very few that combine doctrinal clarity and pastoral warmth. Death needs to be on people's agenda.

v. Our suffering is not a battle against suffering but against sin

I think very helpfully Piper warns us against the 'battling with cancer' language. Cancer does not win the battle when we die, you know the language, 'she lost her battle with cancer' and you find Christians using that language too. No, if there is a defeat it is when, not cancer, but sin leads us to stop treasuring Christ. We must not forget that the battle is not against suffering but against sin and Satan just as it has always been but now in the context of suffering which of course serves to draw the battle lines even more sharply, to raise the stakes as it were.

vi. Our suffering is not without hope

Paul reminds us doesn't he, there is grief, the loss felt by those who are dying and the loss felt by those left behind and nothing we have said about God's purposes in any way minimizes that loss or the pain it causes.

However Christians are people of hope, not only is our God intimately at work in us but our God is a '*God of the living and not the dead*' (Matthew 22:32), a God of the future, '*we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies, for in this hope we were saved*' (Romans 8:23,24) Therefore we hope and again we need to set that hope before one another.

vii Our suffering is a witness to the immeasurable greatness of Christ

I want again to be careful what I say here. It would be easy to tell ourselves and others that what really matters is to be a witness in our suffering which may lead some sufferers to despair at their failure and others on a journey to prove something. Actually what people need to see is believers, warts and all, through suffering treasuring Christ, not a self contrived confidence that tries to pretend that there is no real pain but through weakness holding on to Him because that sends out a message not about us but about God's amazing sustaining grace. Through weakness God's grace and power are displayed. (2Cor.12: 9,10)

God is sovereign, God is faithful, God is good and ..

4. God raises the dead

Yes, He is the God of all comfort now as we grieve but for us as Christians we *'do not grieve as those who have no hope'* (1Thess. 4:13 NIV). Our hope is in Christ and the fulfillment of that hope lies in the future.

'We believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep' (1Thess. 4:13-14)

'Our citizenship is in heaven. And from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body.' (Phil. 3:20, 21)

We await our resurrection bodies and God's new creation and there *'will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain'* (Rev. 21:3, NIV)

That is God's glorious future. And while we recognize that death itself is the last enemy, its abolition waiting on Jesus' return, nevertheless, as Paul makes crystal clear, death has been stripped of its power.

'The sting of death is sin and the power of sin is the law' (1Cor. 15:56), but where the price of sin has been paid and the curse of sin set aside by the One who died in our place, well, *'thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.'*

The extraordinary has happened, in Christ and because of the cross the sentence of death has become the path to life, so Paul can say, *'For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain ...my desire is to depart and be with Christ for that is far better'* (Phil. 1:21-23).

To die in Christ is to be with Christ and wait with Christ until his return.

We were much helped by the wonderful words of William Romaine speaking of his approaching death and based on Hebrews 9,

'You are taking down my earthly tent with much love and tenderness. You have prepared a house not made with hands, eternal and in the heavens. May you never leave me nor forsake me, 'til I be with you, where you are, and be like Christ and enjoy Him for ever and ever!' (Quoted from *'The Dawn of Heaven Breaks'* by Sharon James, page 42, original source not given)

It disturbs me that all too often even among Christians we seem to think that somehow when a Christian dies God has failed and faith is defeated. Nothing could be further from the truth. Perhaps we need to go back the older language, it may have been quaint, when we spoke about *'God taking his loved ones home'*.

And again it concerns me that as Christians we get into the world's way of talking and when someone dies young, and today that could include anyone under 80, we talk of their death as premature and untimely. Yes, we recognize that from our perspective and our experience the death of a loved one may be untimely and premature, for that death will have dashed so many of our hopes and aspirations yet ultimately, when we are able to see things from God's perspective his timing was perfect.

Listen to Spurgeon again commenting on Psalm 116:15, *'Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints'*.

'They shall not die prematurely; they shall be immortal till their work is done; and when their time shall come to die, then their deaths shall be precious. The Lord watches over their dying beds, soothes their pillows, sustains their hearts, and receives their souls. Those who are redeemed with precious blood are so dear to God that even their deaths are precious to him. The deathbeds of saints are very precious to the church, she often learns much from them; they are very precious to all believers, who delight to treasure up the last words of the departed; but they are most of all precious to the Lord Jehovah himself, who views the triumphant deaths of

his gracious ones with sacred delight. If we have walked before him in the land of the living, we need not fear to die before him when the hour of our departure is at hand'

I remember one hospital consultant lost for words when Eluned spoke to her of her immortality till the day Christ would take her home.

Brothers and sisters our God raises the dead and we are more than conquerors, more than conquerors even as we are dying, even as we face death all day long as Paul puts it, because in Christ death has become our servant and the path to the life of eternity.

5. God is the God of new beginnings.

Lastly we need to affirm that God is the God of new beginnings, that is true for loved ones who have died in Christ and for those left behind.

I suspect we will all have come across people in our churches who have failed to do that, who still live in the past and whose lives still revolve around those who have died perhaps many years before.

Now while we are all different and we grieve in different ways and there is no right or wrong when it comes to the length of our grieving. We do need to remember that we live for Christ, as those who belong to Him, with a responsibility to press on, straining towards what is ahead not what lies behind. Again with great gentleness we need to help people to begin to live for what lies ahead, for what God has prepared for us, to continue the work He still has for us to do, that's why we are here. So neither for those who have died nor those who are left is it the end but simply the next stage on our adventure with the LORD.

As we have said whether living or dying we do so by God's amazing grace to the eternal glory and praise of our God and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

The God who is good and faithful and sovereign, the God who raises the dead and by his grace makes all things new – teach one another these things.

Now if you have the stamina I'd like to draw some very practical conclusions from personal experience over the last year, both being with Eluned and in bereavement but also as pastor to a congregation through this time.

These thoughts are perhaps a little more random in selection and order.

I guess one of the remaining questions to ask is something like this, what does it mean to die well as a Christian in today's culture where as we've seen death is not on the agenda in the way it was for many previous generations. What does it mean to grieve well?

What does it mean to pastor a congregation when we are the ones who are suffering and maintain hope?

First, a word about the process of dying.

You will have seen from my earlier brief history that illness and the prospect of death were never far away from us from the time Eluned and I met. We were always conscious how very narrow the gulf between this life and God's future. I think it did make us think more of heaven, and that makes the experience though very hard, very precious.

When we first moved to Hailsham and health issues resurfaced we would simply say to each other well it doesn't look like we'll be joining the geriatric throngs strolling down Eastbourne seafront but there was a job to do together, a big job at St Mary's, to turn around a town centre church, to reestablish the gospel at its heart and we gave ourselves to that.

However as time moved on and in summer 2006 as she got worse there were difficult questions for Eluned. Not 'why suffering?', she could have asked that question at any point in her adult life but 'why now?'. 'Why move us Lord from a wonderful congregation which had grown around us in Riseley?', 'Why move us from our friends and our support and give us a job that we now feel incapable of doing?'

Her/our response then was first one of puzzlement, not angry with God, but puzzled at how his ways could possibly make sense. Remember as I've hinted there are often no explanations for the questions we want to ask, but nevertheless Scripture points very clearly to the purpose of God.

That puzzlement gave way in turn to frustration. Eluned grew very frustrated at what she couldn't do at St Mary's and what she felt she was stopping me from doing. For Christians facing illness or indeed simply growing older and being unable to do what they used to do that is a big issue. We will need to help one another to realize that our aim is to know him and grow like him and sometimes that will mean doing nothing, again we've seen our holiness is ultimately more important than our activity.

For Eluned there then developed a quiet contentment in the LORD, a growing assurance that we were in the right place, that this situation was God's place for us. Again it's Joseph who says it to his brothers, *'do not fear, for I am in the place of God'* (Genesis 50:19)

The medics often found that very difficult to understand when she would say that.

Puzzlement, frustration then contentment but with it a growing impatience too, particularly as Eluned grew physically weaker but also as she ticked off the things she needed to do, she was ready to go, not with any sense of bravado, but just quietly trusting each day to the Lord but with growing longing for the future.

Dying well, I don't know, that's for others to judge but I think I learnt that it at least means

- **content in the LORD** no matter what, that this is his place for us, being able to accept that, angry at death perhaps but knowing that its sting has gone, and trusting that all including the moment of our death and what lies ahead is in his loving hands
- **settled**, as far as it is in our power, **in our relationships**, having said what we need to say, sought forgiveness and offered forgiveness, cemented those ties of family and friendship, there is an important process of saying 'goodbye' not always explicitly because those we love may not be able to hear it as bluntly as that
- **holding out the word of life**, again not a trumpeting of things in a gung ho way, but quietly speaking of faith. I remember Eluned talking with her brother and sister neither of whom are Christians, talking of Jesus and our hope and being ready to talk to the health professionals and one MacMillan nurse in particular with Eluned spent a lot of time, explaining a living faith to an occasional Anglican.
- **continuing to serve faithfully** as far as we are able, perhaps one of the most remarkable things, Eluned ministering from her chair, she never retired to bed until she

died, to visitors and she patiently cared for them, recognizing that many were much less able to cope with what was happening than she was. On the other hand for those who care there is an issue here about when we stop, my biggest regret was not clearing my desk sooner in order to just be with Eluned, not so much to fulfil the active caring role which I did anyway but to give time to sit, I actually stopped parish work and handed everything over on the morning of the day she died, it was not soon enough

- **ready to be served**, how important to allow others to serve and minister to us, and comfort us, some of us ministers find that very hard
- **recognizing that it is all by his grace**

Second, a word about how God ministered his grace to us,

- through wonderful friends who prayed and visited and welcomed us and continue to do so
- through mature and thoughtful children who shared something of our journey, though we did not tell them everything as soon as we knew it but when we felt they needed to know for their sake
- through excellent and very caring hospital staff, the local hospice team and MacMillan nurses, we believe He is Lord of all of life and not just Lord of the gospel, so it was important to consider carefully different treatments offered, to listen humbly to advice recognizing God's hand in all but eventually to reach our own decisions
- through short term goals, it was clear early on that planning long term which I love to do was no longer possible, but short term targets were an invaluable encouragement, to plan a mini break, a weekend visit from friends, a meal – it brought great joy
- through the best Bible teaching, during the last two years we made a deliberate commitment to go to Keswick twice and New Word Alive twice, the last trip to NWA was in caravan, luxury, but absolutely freezing, we slept in jumpers and hats but we would not have missed, that was just over a month before Eluned died and it was just so brilliant to be there and it meant so much especially Alec on Exodus at Keswick, mind blowing and heart warming
- through great books, I've listed some that we found very helpful. Marc Maillefer's 'God in the Storm' is more popular and very good to give away. Although I would caution that picking the right book for the right time isn't easy. When I first gave Sharon James' book to Eluned she didn't welcome it, she did a few months later. Equally Piper's article 'Don't Waste Your Cancer', her first reaction, 'it's all very well for him, he got better'. Also for very simple access to God's word became more important and Eluned found Joni Eareckson's, 'Diamonds in the Dust' very sustaining.
- through good music, the music of Keith and Kristyn Getty, particularly some of the less well known songs about grace through suffering were a brilliant inspiration
- through openness and honesty between us, I hesitate to say this because I think we failed more often than we succeeded, but it was important to be together wherever possible at hospital appointments etc and the flexibility of our job helps to be able to do that, it was important to talk about what was happening but also to carry on talking about everything we'd always talked about. Perhaps the most difficult of course was talking about the future, I'd be talking about some future plan for St Mary's, she knowing she probably wouldn't be there to see it but very graciously she welcomed that, and we talked about what I should do as well and that was very important. Again

there were times when Eluned was not yet ready for that conversation but equally times when others weren't, I remember how she shocked Julian Milson with her request over lunch one day to preach at her funeral, with text, Rev 1. Planning her funeral was very important for her, she left us some discretion but there was no doubt about her priorities and in the end it was an extraordinarily powerful testimony.

- through applying James 5, we thought long and hard about that, not that we doubted we should but when was the question; eventually we agreed Wallace and Lindsay would come just after Christmas 2007 at the point we had decided against any further treatment. It was a very special time and I think it's greatest significance was to help us move on to the next stage of anticipating Eluned's death and for the two of us God brought a liberating effect allowing us to talk much more openly about the future for us both, what next for her and what next for me.

Finally, a word as a pastor

- we need to teach people these truths, of God's sovereignty, of God's purpose in suffering, of death defeated and of dying well in Christ before the storms come, so they need to be a much more frequent element in our teaching
- we need to understand one of the purposes for which pastors suffer, here is Paul, *'if we are afflicted it is for your comfort and salvation' (2 Cor.1:6)*. Our suffering as pastors designed by God not only for our benefit but for that of our congregation. And that shouldn't surprise us for if the sufferings of our chief Shepherd were for the salvation of the flock, those of his under shepherds will also, under God, be for the comfort and salvation of the flock. Maybe that's what Paul means when he talks of *'filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, the church' (Colossians 1:24)*. Not of course in the sense of adding anything to the atoning power of the cross but in the sense of demonstrating in real lives the cross shaped pattern of Christian life and ministry. So as pastors are lives will be marked by suffering, that's very sobering, but that suffering is not only for our own good but for the good of God's people. John Piper writes, *'No pastoral suffering is senseless. No pastoral pain is pointless. No adversity is absurd or meaningless. Every heartache has its divine target in the consolation of the saints, even when we feel least useful.'* (*'Brothers we are not professionals', page 140*)
- we need to demonstrate that pain and grief are real, no false triumphalism, it doesn't help, but equally that grace sustains us and hope lifts us up. We are not called to demonstrate a 'spiritual stiff upper lip' or indeed a gung ho denial couched in the language of Zion. If Jesus wept so can we, mourning is a natural part of loss, it reminds us that death is a real enemy even though a defeated one, we must not pretend otherwise, to do so will not help our congregations
- we need to talk as far as we are able about what is happening, Piper is right, *'Brothers, we are not professionals',* we are members, brothers and sisters in the family of God. A family who want to love us and care for us the best they can, we should not shut them out, because if we do who will model to them godliness in suffering. Now what we say and to whom we say it will vary. The blog of a pastor in NI, a bit younger than me whose wife had died, he kept a blog for 6 months, that wouldn't have been my way but I understand exactly what he was trying to do – perhaps we need to learn again how to

talk much more personally about our own walk with God and our failures too, for again if we don't how can we expect of our congregations to do so. Someone reminded me of John Bunyan and the conversations of the poor women of Bedford that had such an effect on him.

- we need to remember that our congregations may not see things as clearly as we do, they may have all manner of fears, in many cases they will not necessarily be very mature in the faith, don't blame for that, be patient with them, gently show them and teach them
- we need to look out for the 'wacky', there will be those like the lady who confidently told me that the doctors' prognosis was wrong, Eluned would recover, or the man who told me after one evening service how his wife had died, but God had told him she wouldn't, so they went to the undertakers and prayed around her body for resurrection; get others to intercept these folk if you can, but if not ask God for patience and be gentle with them but it is worth asking how we can protect each other from the wacky in our congregations
- don't be afraid to talk about what has happened or surprised when God uses that, I don't believe I've done anything different but a few weeks ago someone thanked for my preaching and said there was a new 'weight and power' to it over the last few months because of everything that had happened
- we need to continue to serve as far as we are able but recognize that there times when we simply need to rest or be away or be alone, in that too we honour Christ, for we are not called to be super heroes but those who, to quote the children's song, rely on one '*who is greater than the greatest heroes*'.
- we need to demonstrate publicly that we too believe in new beginnings, a few days after Eluned died an occasional member of the congregation said to me, 'oh, I expect you'll be leaving us now'. Why would I want to do that, I said, God has called me here, with a job to do and as far as I can tell that job is not finished. A few weeks later I felt I needed to say that to the whole congregation.

So remember we are not alone, we will have all the help we need for from Him,
'My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus'
(Phil. 4:19)

*'When through fiery trials your pathway shall lie,
His grace, all sufficient, shall be your supply:
The flames shall not harm you: his only design
your dross to consume, and your gold to refine'*

*'K' in Rippon's Selection 1787
In this version Praise Trust*

David Bourne
02/02/09
Bible quotations:

English Standard Version: Copyright 2001: Crossway Bibles
New International Version: Copyright 1979, 1984: International Bible Society

Books I have found particularly helpful over the past months -

John Piper

- Spectacular Sins (Crossway)
- Don't Waste Your Cancer (on line article)
- Brother, We Are Not Professionals (Mentor – Christian Focus)

Alec Motyer

- The Treasures of the King (IVP)
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How do we help one another towards a different perspective on death and God's future?

How do we face the conflict, as some see it, between listening to health professionals and trusting the Lord and help others to do the same?

How can we avoid the false 'professionalism' that prevents us from engaging with our congregations at a personal level? Are we really just afraid they will see us for what we are, sinners like them?

How can we protect one another from the 'wacky'?

Fellowship of Word and Spirit Conference 2009
MAINTAINING HOPE IN SUFFERING

Introduction

A Brief History

So what do we really need to know about God?

1. God is God

2. God is good, He is the God of all comfort

3. God is faithful

4. God is sovereign

i. Our suffering is from God

ii. Our suffering is designed for our sanctifying and for the display of God's glory

iii. Our suffering is designed to lead us to ask, 'what is God teaching us?'

iv. Our suffering is designed to lead us to pray

iv. Our suffering is designed to lead us to consider death

v. Our suffering is not a battle against suffering but against sin

vi. Our suffering is not without hope

vii Our suffering is a witness to the immeasurable greatness of Christ

4. God raises the dead

5. God is the God of new beginnings.

A word about the process of dying.

- content in the LORD now and for the future
- settled in our relationships,
- holding out the word of life,
- continuing to serve faithfully
- ready to be served,
- recognizing that it is all by his grace

A word about how God ministered his grace to us,

A word for pastors

David Bourne

02/02/09

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