

I must admit when Josh asked me to share today, I felt no small degree of trepidation. But, trying to be dutiful and assuming Josh's request for me to speak was prayerfully motivated, and also having trouble saying no (although my children will probably not agree with that last statement), I accepted his invitation.

Taking time out from thinking about how to approach such a broad topic, I was scrolling through some photos from our recent family holiday in Wanaka, and the beautiful shots of the mountains stirred me. There is something so Majestic about mountains—their grandeur, imposing sense of solidity, and our desire to immerse ourselves in that beauty, our striving to climb to the top of mountains—both real and metaphorical, and our lauding of those who achieve such feats, I am sure resonates with a lot of us.

Certainly in the Bible the mountains/mountain tops are the focus of pilgrimages of transcendence and spiritual elevation—symbolising the nearness of God, as they extend towards the heavens. Moses receives God's Commandments on Mount Sinai; Jesus goes up a mountain to pray, taking Peter, John and James with him and is transfigured; he is crucified on the Mount of Skull (Golgotha), and ascends to heaven on the Mount of Olives.

The corollary of mountain tops being places of aspirational attainment, close to heaven, Valleys are often portrayed as places of battle, struggle and darkness—close to the depths of the earth. We read of the valley of the shadow of death in Psalm 23, the valley of tears in Psalm 84, the valley of

Jehoshophat just outside Jerusalem's East Wall is the valley of suffering. And the end-time battle will be fought in the valley of Jezreel.

Meditating on the mountainous landscape and its biblical metaphors reminded me of an interesting exercise I once participated in at spiritual seminar when I was much younger. The exercise was to plot our life so far as a line graph. My graph looked like a mountain range—filled with peaks and troughs of different heights and depths, but mostly peaks and the general trend was upwards.

I come from a happy, stable Christian family, was given lots of amazing opportunities, worked hard and generally expected that would translate to mostly lofty mountain tops eventually reaching a Pinnacle. God was good. I was blessed with marriage to David and a daughter Elizabeth, and working in my chosen career of ophthalmology: life was on the whole fantastic, and I was happy.

And that is often equated with success in today's world, isn't it? Where the pursuit of happiness is a lofty goal, and achieving happiness—together with a generous dollop of health, wealth and stimulating experiences—means you have 'made it'.

But my life graph soon dipped into a pretty deep, pretty rocky valley. David and I are slightly older parents and we found we were having trouble providing Elizabeth with a sibling and we received results indicating it was quite unlikely

I would have another pregnancy. On that same day a pregnancy test proved positive. We were so joyful to have been blessed with not a singleton but a twin pregnancy—Amelia and a little boy. Our Joy was tempered by a later scan which showed a high likelihood of 1 of the twins having a genetic abnormality. Our sorrow deepened when that twin died.

We rejoiced when Amelia was born— a seemingly healthy, delightful wee red-haired poppet. But aged 5 months she was diagnosed as having had a stroke and at 11 months (the day before I was due to go back to work) we got her diagnosis of metatropic dysplasia—a rare form of dwarfism.

Where was that God who had watched over me and guided our family until now? The bandages we had put on over the wounds of losing our baby boy unravelled, and it felt like our life was a deep valley filled with a stony dry river bed, and sheer sides impossible to climb up. Elizabeth, at age 2 asked “Mummy, when will you be happy again?”

I felt a little like Job, and we lamented.

Life became a balancing act of caring for a child with special needs and all the attendant hospital and therapy appointments that entailed, caring for a healthy older sibling who maybe felt a little neglected, being a wife to my stoic husband, and caring for my patients. Our aspirations and dreams for Amelia seemed, if not dashed, certainly dulled and dented. I cried out to God—lifting my eyes to the Hills,

desperate to be strengthened by him who promised to uphold me, wanting him to take away my burdens and restore my happiness.

But, slowly, painfully at times, we have learned that hard is not necessarily bad, and that we cannot measure God's goodness by our level of personal happiness and our physical, external and immediate circumstances.

In Matthew Chapter 11,

Jesus invited us to 'come to me, all you who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light'.

He does not expect us to wear a plastic smile over a broken heart—he acknowledges that in his invitation to people who were “weary and heavy-laden”. He does not ignore the hardship and pain that come with living in a fallen world.

And neither does Amelia—I was talking with her the other day and listening to her frustrations with life and school—not being able to run cross-country with the other girls, having to wear her brace, be in a wheelchair, being stared at, and so on. After listing her current grievances, she had one last, all-encompassing vent “that silly Adam and Eve: why on earth did she eat that apple?”

God wants his people to genuinely and passionately cry out to him. Jesus says come to me—bring our hurt, our questions, even our complaints to his throne of Grace.

In Habakkuk Chapter 1, the Prophet actively questions God: O Lord, how long must I beg for your help before you listen? How long before you save us from all this violence? Why do you make me watch such terrible injustice? Why do you allow violence, lawlessness, crime and cruelty to spread everywhere?

Similar questions are asked by a man named Asaph in Psalm 73, who respectfully questioned God, admitting he was weary and burdened with questions and challenges that were beyond his own wisdom and strength.

So we are to tell Jesus about our problems and burdens. But also do something about it, and accept the responsibility of the burden. He offers us his yoke. John McArthur explains in his exposition of Matthew that a yoke was made of wood, hand-hewn to fit the neck and shoulders of the particular animal that was to wear it. The use of the term yoke in the ancient world was a metaphor for submission. It was part of the harness used to pull a cart, plough or mill-beam, and was the means by which the animal's master kept it under control and guided it in useful work. Thus a yoke allows the wearer to accomplish something that is hard. Following Jesus is not meant to be easy—it involves submitting to his plan.

But we must never forget that it is Jesus' yoke. "Take my yoke" he says. Every challenge we face is one that our Lord and Saviour chose for us. I have railed against this yoke, on behalf of Amelia carrying this burden in her own valley, and submitting to Jesus' plan for us and our family. I have cried long into many nights after listening to my daughter pray earnestly to be healed, and it clearly not being granted.

As we are learning ourselves, we are trying to teach Amelia: the weight of our yoke is balanced by the glory of eternity—eternity is what contextualises earthly suffering. The responsibility Jesus has given us is only temporary— a vapour compared to the length of eternity.

Paul's second letter to the Corinthians Chapter 4, verses 16-18 says:

Therefore, do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

It is impossible to understand what God is doing, or to face hard times successfully, if the reliability of eternity is missing from the picture. Life viewed from the perspective of eternity looks radically different.

Jesus has made incredible promises through his apostle Paul in his letter to the churches in Corinth.

He wrote that God is faithful, and will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that we will be able to endure it.

And in his message to the churches in Philippi—which was our new testament reading today—he exhorts us to not worry about anything, but pray about everything. To have thankful hearts offering up our prayers and requests to God. And as we belong to Christ Jesus, in return we are blessed with a peace no one can completely understand. And this peace will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, that is: it will control how we think and feel.

The gospel message of John says likewise in verse 27: I give you peace, the kind of peace that only I can give. It is not like the peace that this world can give. So do not be worried or afraid.

His goal for me is not the abundance of earthly things- good times, great experiences, material possessions, and a life of ease. It is the abundance of hope in God.

Jesus promised that he would give rest for the soul to those willing to take his yoke. The peace and rest that Jesus offers involves comfort and assurance that God will continue to sustain us as we abide in him. Part of this is the 'rest of Contentment' that comes over us when we really believe

that God has a plan for our lives and that his plan is good. There is the 'rest of Joy': not only Amelia, but also Elizabeth and our other miracle Gabriella: All delight us with an often irrepressible Joy and impish sense of humour. Finally, there is the 'rest of Fulfilment'. God offers the suffering, discouraged, and embittered individual **himself**. Not a set of principles, nor the way to get what we want, but **himself** to be

-our identity

-our strength

-our future

-and our hope.

He is what we need, and is working so that we can say with Habakkuk:

Fig trees may no longer bloom, or vineyards produce grapes; olive trees may be fruitless and harvest time a failure; sheep pens may be empty, and cattle stalls vacant—but I will still celebrate because the Lord God saves me. The Lord gives me strength. He makes my feet as sure as those of a deer, and he helps me stand on the mountains.

Amen.

