

31st January 2021 10 am Strengthening Grace

Service led by Andrew Attwood, who also interviews Steve & Ruth Sutton about faith and ill health, Talk by Val Whiteman

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Interview with Steve and Ruth Sutton: Living with MS in Faith

[Andrew:] Thank you very much for being available for these questions I wanted to ask you, and I just wondered if, for a first question, you might set the scene in describing the beginning of your story with regards to long term, ongoing illness?

[Steve:] It started a year after we got married, so that's 43 years ago. And Ruth just went lame, in just one leg. We didn't know what it was. So you went to the doctor.

[Ruth:] Yes.

[Steve:] And he gave you a course of injections into your thigh.

[Ruth:] Yes.

[Steve:] And after about three weeks, it cleared up. And then a couple years, or maybe 20 months later, it started again, and so you went to the doctor, again, to give you a course of injections. And after three weeks, you were back at work again. And then a couple of years later, it started again. So we went to a specialist. And he examined Ruth, but he didn't tell us what the problem was. It was only when we moved house, and we wanted to start a family. We'd moved to a different area, and I thought, "Well, I'd better get life insurance on Ruth, in case things don't work out the way we think it should do." And I couldn't get life insurance! And the insurance agent was a friend of my brother's. And he said, "Look, I can't tell you, you have to go and see your doctor." So we went to our doctor, who was a Christian doctor at that point, and he told us that it was MS.

[Andrew:] Wow.

[Steve:] And that's how we found out.

[Andrew:] So given that that was a gradual discovery, in what ways has it affected the both of you over the years, in what ways has the illness affected you as a couple, you as individuals?

[Steve:] The type of MS is known as 'RR' which is 'relapsing remitting' MS, it was at that point, which means it comes and goes. It's actually quite faith-destroying as you pray and it goes and then it comes back again. But the remissions get shorter and shorter and it doesn't fully clear.

[Ruth:] Yes.

[Steve:] So it's starting from a higher base level, as it were. So when it hits again, it's worse every time until it becomes 'secondary progressive' where there are no gaps, there's no remission at all, it's just a progressive disability which is where you're at now.

[Ruth:] That's where I am at now.

[Andrew:] So Ruth, I mean just in terms of how this has affected you, what kind of things has it done in terms of limiting you or made things hard? What kind of things come to mind as to how it's been for you?

[Ruth:] I spend a lot of time thinking about holidays that we've had and I think on the positive to keep me ... so, yes.

[Steve:] This type of MS has actually attacked her brain as well, it's destroyed parts of her brain, and so she finds it difficult now to maintain things and to especially stay attentive and retain things.

[Andrew:] So, given that that's very debilitating for obviously a long time, where does faith fit into this for you? How has faith helped or in what ways

have you journeyed with God through this situation?

[Ruth:] Well, we've taken to God.

[Steve:] We pray about it. Having God with us, day to day, every day, in everyday tasks, really, because everything becomes a bit of a problem then. And finding encouragement from reading the Bible together, praying together and that's really our mainstay, is our reading together. It does two things. It helps you in your reading as you forget words.

[Andrew:] Right.

[Steve:] So it's really our mainstay, as I said, and knowing we can ask Him for anything at any time. Ask His help. So it's fabulous, really, isn't it? I mean, let's face it.

[Ruth:] We have help from St. John's.

We have help from...

[Andrew:] from the church?

[Ruth:] Yeah, yeah.

[Steve:] Yes, when we get together, then friends stimulate you, don't they?

[Ruth:] Definitely,

[Steve:] Which we do miss during lockdown, that stimulation of time.

[Andrew:] And what about, what about yourself, Steve, what sustains you, faith-wise? Obviously, you play a role as a husband and carer, to some extent, with Ruth. What sustains you faith-wise?

[Steve:] It is that personal walk, that closeness, that being able to, you know, when things are really bad, I'll go upstairs and pour it all out before the Lord. And then I'll come down and we'll talk it over. And He shows us really what the way ahead is, whether it needs more effort, because Ruth's finding that she can't do something that she could do last week. Sometimes it needs more effort, and a bit more attention given to it. Other times it needs life adjustment. And so we have to alter things in how we live in order to actually cope with the situation.

[Andrew:] Okay, so it sounds like you both are having to continuously learn and, presumably learning as Christians as you go?

[Ruth:] Yes, very much so.

[Steve:] Yes, very much so, very much so. It really is. I don't know how we would have managed without a deep faith and trust in Jesus as Saviour and God's love for us. I really don't know how we would manage ...

[Andrew:] Okay.

[Steve:] ... with all that's gone on, He's always there. I mean, you don't always want and like what is going on. But He helps us make the most of it, the best of it.

[Ruth:] Yeah.

[Andrew:] Good.

[Steve:] But I think the main secret, it's our trust in God. But facing every difficulty with humour,

[Andrew:] Right

[Ruth:] Yes.

[Steve:] We laugh a lot. We have a happy home. And you have to just laugh at when things go wrong.

[Andrew:] Okay.

[Steve:] Really, that's a big thing we've learned. Treat everything with humour, because God loves us, even though Ruth hasn't been healed yet, and we've prayed for healing many times, it's just the knowledge that He loves and cares for us. There's an old song which I looked up recently, and the chorus words are this and it's really our testimony, isn't it?

[Ruth:] Yes.

[Steve:] The chorus words go, "Some through the waters, some through the flood, some through the fire, but all through the Blood. Some through great sorrow, but God gives a song in the night season and all the day long."¹ And we literally start our day singing. We do. We play a little game. We start each day with the

1 God Leads Us Along – by George A. Young, 1903. https://library.timelesstruths.org/music/God_Leads_Us_Along/

alphabet, with one of the letters from the alphabet, and the task is to think of the words of a hymn, a verse or a chorus, and sing it through. And that's how we start our day. And each day, we take a different letter. So we start our day, singing, praising, and that's a real help to start.

[Andrew:] Look, it's been lovely to talk with you. I'm really impressed. Thank you very much for answering my questions. Okay?

[Steve:] Our pleasure.

Talk: Strengthening Grace

[Val Whiteman:]

I watched that before, and I find it unbearably moving. I mean, how wonderful that the testimony is that Jesus is with them, always. So I'd like a moment of quiet while we think about what Ruth and Steve said, before I start to talk.

Father God, thank You so much for Ruth and Steve. Thank You for the testimony that You are with them always, even through the darkest times. And we pray that this may continue. We may not understand why You don't heal, because we probably would. But we pray for Your faith and Your understanding and Your trust and Your love, for them and for all of us. Amen.

So I feel like kind-of 'follow that'! Last week, we heard about sanctifying grace from Andrew and that's how to live more like Jesus. And this, as Andrew says, the last one in the series, will overlap it a little and continue it. It's, to remind you, 'strengthening grace', the power to live for God even in suffering and in trouble. So, remember, Andrew's challenged us to think about what we might be carrying at the moment on our own, without God. So can you hang on to that thought for a while until I finish.

I want to look back a little at what grace means. I didn't realise that it came from the Hebrew word which describes God's choosing of His people through the covenants in the Old Testament, the undeserved choice of the Israelites, out of all the other people that God could have chosen. They didn't deserve it, it was His choice. In the New Testament, in the New Covenant, and we remember grace is, traditionally, God's Riches At Christ's Expense. Without grace, we can't enter into contact with God at all, we're justified through grace in Jesus. And we need to accept that nothing we can do will enable us to be holy enough to come into His presence, but thank God, Christ did it all by His death on the Cross. And we, because we love Him, accept that sacrifice, and therefore we are free to be the people we should be. But that's not where it ends. Grace, if it's grace at all, must continue throughout our Christian life. You don't get a kind of one-off fix when you become a Christian, you are justified by faith. And then you are sanctified by that grace, that God gives us, the grace that makes us grow more and more, if we live with it, like Jesus. So the reading we've got today is from 2 Corinthians 12:1-10. And I'm just going to read it from *The Message*, which I know is a paraphrase, but I just wanted the immediacy of Paul's words, and not that sort of 'holiness' which surrounds more careful translations. So Paul is talking to the Corinthians who, it is fair to say, have annoyed him. So, over to Andrew.

[Andrew:]

Thank you, Val. So this is 2 Corinthians 12:1-10. From version/translation, *The Message*

1-5 You've forced me to talk this way, and I do it against my better judgment. But now that we're at it, I may as well bring up the matter of visions and revelations that God gave me. For instance, I know a man who, fourteen years ago, was seized by Christ and swept in ecstasy to the heights of heaven. I really don't know if this took place in the body or out of it; only God

knows. I also know that this man was hijacked into paradise—again, whether in or out of the body, I don't know; God knows. There he heard the unspeakable spoken, but was forbidden to tell what he heard. This is the man I want to talk about. But about myself, I'm not saying another word apart from the humiliations.

6 If I had a mind to brag a little, I could probably do it without looking ridiculous, and I'd still be speaking plain truth all the way. But I'll spare you. I don't want anyone imagining me as anything other than the fool you'd encounter if you saw me on the street or heard me talk.

7-10 Because of the extravagance of those revelations, and so I wouldn't get a big head, I was given the gift of a handicap to keep me in constant touch with my limitations. Satan's angel did his best to get me down; what he in fact did was push me to my knees. No danger then of walking around high and mighty! At first I didn't think of it as a gift, and begged God to remove it. Three times I did that, and then he told me,

My grace is enough; it's all you need.

My strength comes into its own in your weakness.

Once I heard that, I was glad to let it happen. I quit focusing on the handicap and began appreciating the gift. It was a case of Christ's strength moving in on my weakness. Now I take limitations in stride, and with good cheer, these limitations that cut me down to size—abuse, accidents, opposition, bad breaks. I just let Christ take over! And so the weaker I get, the stronger I become.

This is the word of the Lord.

[Val Whiteman:]

Before I start, I need to say that Hamish has kindly put some background notes² on Corinthians on the church website for you to look at if you want more detail, because I'm not going to have time to do much in the way of history of the church and so on. So if you're interested, have a look.

You heard from Steve and Ruth what it's like to live in this strengthening grace. It's a long haul, and not one we enter lightly. And I'm finding this talk really hard, because if I'm not careful, it comes across as glib, which is the last thing I want. I think if you want to experience this strengthening grace, you have to live it over a lifetime, as Ruth and Steven have had to. I like Eugene Peterson's title of his book on the Psalms, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, which says it all.

Paul's really concerned for the Christians at Corinth because false teachers have tried to show them shortcuts to grace, which means that Christians can control their life and not Christ. If you're like me, it's something you have to learn daily, that Jesus is Lord and not me. Too often, I try to take back control and live my life in my own strength. Not even Paul tried that and succeeded.

Paul talks about relying on God in the terrible difficulties he faces. When he arrived in Corinth, he felt worn out from all the terrible things that had happened before. He felt he could not go on. Yet God says to him that he should not worry, that there are people in Corinth who will listen, he won't be harmed, so he relies on God for the strength to go on, and the result is the Christian church. There's still a lingering feeling that if we follow Christ, bad things shouldn't happen to us, and it's this that Paul attacks. He himself has suffered for the Gospel. He says in 2 Corinthians 11,

2 By Val

23-27 I've worked much harder, been jailed more often, beaten up more times than I can count, and at death's door time after time. I've been flogged five times with the Jews' thirty-nine lashes, beaten by Roman rods three times, pummelled with rocks once. I've been shipwrecked three times, and immersed in the open sea for a night and a day. In hard travelling year in and year out, I've had to ford rivers, fend off robbers, struggle with friends, struggle with foes. I've been at risk in the city, at risk in the country, endangered by desert sun and sea storm, and betrayed by those I thought were my brothers. I've known drudgery and hard labour, many a long and lonely night without sleep, many a missed meal, blasted by the cold, naked to the weather.

When you speak truth to power, you tend to get into trouble. We have a slightly different problem in this country: we tend to be ignored to death. We're irrelevant and people don't listen when we try to tell them the danger or the truth of the Gospel. And that still hurts; it can still lead to rejection and damaged careers. But it's not surprising, and God is still with us, if we are obedient to His Word.

Worse and more problematic for us is when illness or death comes to us or those we love. In Job 5, verse 7, it says³, "Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upwards," and Job should know. As followers of Jesus, we're not exempt from the normal sadnesses of life. One thing that happens to all of us, sooner or later, is death, and for the Christian, although there is the great hope of salvation, there is still grief. Jesus Himself showed that grief as He mourned for His friend Lazarus. In John 11, verse 35, at the graveside it says, "Jesus wept," even though He knew that the sorrow was not going to last. We're allowed to be sad, when someone we love is no longer there. Sorrow and mourning are a part of life, Christian or atheist. We sorrow for the death of Pat Briffa, and we don't understand why she died when she did. I'm not going to speculate; all I'm going to do is to mourn with the family and friends. Again, don't let people tell you how you should react. How hurtful is that? I remember that when the great and wise Christian saint David Watson was dying of cancer, 'helpful' people said he was not healed because he did not have enough faith. What arrogance.

Listen to what Paul says about the thorn he had, this handicap, whatever it was, and I don't want to speculate in what it was, because it was obviously something that hindered him greatly, and maybe hindered him in his ministry. He says that he prayed for it to be removed three times and it wasn't. Why does a loving God let us suffer? Is that the wrong question to ask? I think so. When we suffer, Paul says, God is still with us, and he turns that suffering to joy, as Steve and Ruth have said, and into fruitful ministry, if we let it.

So what do we do if things happen to us or those we love, and we can't understand why? Of course, we pray for healing, or for a change in circumstances. But if they don't change, and the healing doesn't happen, then Paul says something absolutely amazing. "The weaker I get, the stronger I become," or in the NIV, "For when I am weak, then I am strong."⁴ God says, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."⁵

I was reading the other day in the newspaper about 'resilience', that modern virtue, which I'm assuming is much the same as perseverance. The writer said that in the West, we've largely lost our resilience, because our expectation is that we will be well and strong (until we're not). Health is the default position. It's the same idea which sees all disability as something defective that needs to be corrected, so disabled people are seen as somehow less than the able-bodied. Again, I don't know whether you saw that very moving documentary the other week. If things happen to us which are less than ideal, we feel

3 [NKJV]

4 From 2 Corinthians 12:10 [NIVUK 2011]

5 From 2 Corinthians 12:9 [NIVUK 2011]

failures, because we feel we should be well and happy. I think any other century would correct that feeling pretty well.

Certainly, Paul would. Not because he is masochistic or seeks out painful experience, but because he knows that they happen to all of us. If we as Christians don't invest in this strengthening grace, keep on being sanctified by the love and the presence of God to help us when things get hard, then it's very difficult for us to become mature at all.

I know, it's a balance. Please don't think I'm advocating some sort of flagellation. The early church were really wise when they said if you go out of your way to court martyrdom, you aren't a martyr. Paul says in Philippians, chapter 4⁶,

12 I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.

And how does he do that?

13 I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

And it's a similar thing to what he's saying here. If we can rely on God and His grace, He is sufficient to meet all the circumstances we find ourselves in. We need to practice the resilience or the perseverance which means that we rely on Him. And it has to be by practice. When you are justified by grace to start off with, then you know that you can come into the presence of God, you can come in safely, regularly, frequently into this beyond-holy, beyond-loving God that we know, and that He will live within us. But it doesn't count for anything, if we then take back ourselves and say, "Well, thank you very much for justifying grace, now I can cope on my own." The point is, to learn that we continue to rely on Him, day by day, hour by hour and second by second. It takes a long time to grow faith. We shouldn't feel unhappy if sometimes we fall away, because God will always bring us back, have the means to enable us to come back into His presence. In Romans 5⁷, Paul develops this much further. (This is a bit of a long quote, so you might like to look it up.)

1 Therefore, since we have been justified through faith,
(that justified bit)

we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, **2** through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God.
(And then comes the next bit.)

3 Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; **4** perseverance, character; and character, hope. **5** And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

Perseverance isn't an exciting virtue. It's by its nature long-lasting. It isn't showy. It's very hard in today's world, where we are expected to have instant success, to think about years and years of quiet faith in God. But that's what we're called to. Paul looks at grace as God gives it and as we receive it. God's grace is enough for us if we rest in Him. Look at the sacrifice of Jesus. The pain and suffering He carried for us means that there is nowhere where we can say, "So where was God in this?" because Jesus had already stood in the place of injustice, ill treatment, a shameful death. And for us to understand this takes perseverance and faith from *us*, a daily reassertion that Jesus is Lord for *us* in our lives.

6 NIVUK 2011

7 NIVUK 2011

So who do you put your trust in? In yourself? In the exciting ministers who show you shortcuts to grace? Or in the Pauls, who patiently explain that faith in Jesus is all you need. I think today that when we're struggling with so many changes and so much sorrow, that this is the grace we need, strengthening grace, which deepens our reliance on Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith. We need to encourage one another to continue in this grace, which Paul says, and experienced also, is all-sufficient. In fact, we do great things in faith, because we have no strength of our own in which to do anything. Where we are at the end of our tether is where God can begin. God's strength is much greater than ours and His purpose much clearer. So I'd like to end with encouragement for us all to continue in this grace.

Prayerful Responses

[Val Whiteman:]

I'd like to start a time of response by looking where we are. This is the time to think of what you're carrying instead of giving it to God. In a minute, I'm going to read Psalm 130, which is one of the Psalms of Ascents that the Israelites recited as they went up to Jerusalem each year. And it's probably the darkest of them, and it expresses the despair that people feel. Remember, we're allowed to give the darkness to God. So as we think more about relying on God, and less on us, let's think about where we are. The Psalm ends with the knowledge that God will redeem Israel, and you'd like to put in that we stand beyond that redemption in Christ already. So a moment and then I'm going to read the psalm again in The Message.

Help, GOD—I've hit rock bottom!
Master, hear my cry for help!
Listen hard! Open your ears!
Listen to my cries for mercy.
If you, GOD, kept records on wrongdoings,
who would stand a chance?
As it turns out, forgiveness is your habit,
and that's why you're worshipped.
I pray to GOD—my life a prayer—
and wait for what he'll say and do.
My life's on the line before God, my Lord,
waiting and watching till morning,
waiting and watching till morning.
O Israel, wait and watch for GOD—
with GOD's arrival comes love,
with GOD's arrival comes generous redemption.
No doubt about it—he'll redeem Israel,
buy back Israel from captivity to sin.

[Andrew Attwood:]

So let's continue in a moment of quiet. Let's be still and wait on the Lord.

Come, Holy Spirit, and meet us where we are.

Bring to God what you're carrying.

When we are at the end of our tether is where God can begin.

So let Him begin in this moment.

Lord God, we do not pray, not all the time anyway, for instant relief, but Lord, I do pray for strengthening grace in our circumstances.

Would you be with us as we go through trials and difficulties?

Would you make your presence felt?

Would you pour out grace to help us where we are?

And Lord, would you help us to know You better in this place of hardship and suffering?

Would you help us to become mature, not resisting hardship, or trials, but receiving them as an opportunity to know you better?

Help us to say 'yes', Lord, to the many things that come our way including things in our heart.

And Lord, we thank you again for the witness of people like Ruth and Steve, who model for us the availability of strengthening grace, in suffering. We pray that we too will be welcomed into that ministry and that witness, so that we can become mature in grace. Amen.

[Transcribed by Hamish Blair with help from <https://otter.ai>]

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