

GOD'S RICH PATTERN

*Meditations for when our
faith is shaken*



Dr Lin Berwick MBE



Dedication

To those of us who are struggling on our
personal spiritual journey . . .

This book endeavours to recognize that struggle
and come to terms with it. We don't always know the
path that God is leading us down, yet we must be open
to seeing how our lives can be enriched by his pattern,
which is woven through everything that we do.

First published in Great Britain in 2012

Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge
36 Causton Street
London SW1P 4ST
www.spckpublishing.co.uk

Copyright © Dr Lin Berwick 2012

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any
form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying,
recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system,
without permission in writing from the publisher.

SPCK does not necessarily endorse the individual views contained
in its publications.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-281-06709-1
eBook ISBN 978-0-281-06710-7

Typeset by Graphicraft Ltd, Hong Kong
Printed in Great Britain by Ashford Colour Press
Subsequently digitally printed in Great Britain

Produced on paper from sustainable forests

Contents

1	God's rich pattern	1
2	The rock	7
3	Steps of faith	11
4	A change to my world	15
5	Coming out of the darkness	19
6	A window on the world	21
7	Taking up the challenge	25
8	A new way of communicating	29
9	Where to now?	31
10	A change of direction	35
11	Another interesting twist	39
12	Trials and tribulations	45
13	A near-death experience	49
14	New beginnings	53
15	Dogged determination	57
16	Treading water	61
17	A new career	65
18	Shared dark valley	69
19	A fine romance	73
20	A coming together	77
21	A time of discovery	81

Contents

22	Wedding day	85
23	A new life together	89
24	Go forth and tell	91
25	Building blocks for God	93
26	One small step along the way	97
27	Up, up and away	99
28	A devastating moment	103
29	Where was God?	107
30	A reason for living	111
31	Patience through the chaos	115
32	A trip that would make a difference	119
33	Personal cost	123
34	A painful parting	125
35	The peace of acceptance	129
36	My best friend	133
37	The final walk	137

1

God's rich pattern

I write this book from the starting point of having experienced a spiritual breakdown. I'm a fully accredited Methodist Local Preacher with almost fourteen years experience of preaching. By some people's standards that might be classed as minimal, but my calling came out of a very real personal struggle. Right from the age of four years old, daily prayer and scriptural reading were part of my very existence. God and Jesus were my friends. They were as natural to me as breathing.

The certainty was that, whatever was happening in my life, God and Christ were at my shoulder. They were my rock, the foundation on which my life was built, the very bricks and cornerstone of every aspect of my life. I was brain damaged at birth, which resulted in cerebral palsy; I subsequently had surgery (a painful hamstring transplant on both my legs), lost my sight at fifteen years old, which culminated in the removal of both eyes, then had an extremely painful back operation – yet, through all these experiences God was there. In fact, it was after the back surgery in 1978, when I had a near-death experience, that I was given the assurance that God was very much with me. God told me that I wasn't going to die. He had special work for me to do. That special work was heeding the call to preach, and also setting up a charity, The Lin Berwick Trust, with my husband Ralph, to provide holiday accommodation for people with disability, their families and carers.

When I first met Ralph he was a self-confessed atheist. Four years on from our marriage he committed his life to Christ,

and became a member of the Methodist Church. I never pushed religion down his throat, and I hope I never spoke in a brow-beating way to him about faith. I tried to make him feel a part of the family of Christ by loving him, and those around me, into the kingdom of God, not so much by what I said but by what I did. My philosophy on life is that you can create your own little piece of heaven where you are, or your own little piece of hell. My husband's view, when he realized that God was becoming part of his own existence, was that he didn't want to be on the edge of things. He stood with me at the door of the church, where I believe your ministry is as much about what you do there, and how you respond to people, as what you say from the pulpit.

For many, the human contact with the preacher at the door of the church may be the only sense of a 'spiritual hug' that they have in the course of any one week. I can remember an elderly lady, who was not very popular with those around her as she was argumentative and difficult to get along with. She told me that she had started dancing classes because she was desperate for human touch and contact. I picked up on her loneliness and realized, from the way she responded to me, that it was touch that she needed. She was quite perceptive over my blindness and made sure that she maintained human contact with me. People watched this interaction between us and said how surprised they were that I had such a good response from her. Perhaps it was because I picked up on her need using my 'inner-vision' and sense of perception, which is so greatly needed in difficult circumstances.

My husband Ralph meant the world to me. I never thought I would marry. In fact, I never thought anyone would be mad enough to take me on. But Ralph saw through the disability, the wheelchair and the ramifications of living with a lifetime of caring. He saw the person within, the person beyond the chair. This was a unique and very special gift, and something I'll always treasure him for. When we married, my life took off.

For the first six years it was the most flowering and blossoming experience that I had ever encountered. I had lived a very sheltered life up until that point, but Ralph expanded my life and made me blissfully happy. Then tragedy struck.

I should have been able to call on my faith. I should have had the strength of other Christians to support me. I should have realized that, however dark the valley, I would come out on the other side. After all, I had been in many dark valleys during my lifetime, and I had had the absolute assurance and certainty that I would get through. I would be strengthened by the experience and hopefully not let it make me bitter and twisted, but find the positives out of the negatives and be strengthened by them in such a way that I would be able to be strong for others. However, it didn't work in this case. I was completely and utterly floored by the experience. I had a feeling of being absolutely numb inside. Physically cold, totally turned off. Living my life, as hard as it was – in fact during that time it couldn't have got any harder – limping, metaphorically, through the day, praying for the night-time when I would sleep (sleep was rare) and longing not to wake up.

Looking back, I was in a very deep depression. Tranquillizers were not the answer. They were only a sticking plaster. What I needed was physical support and finance, and at that period of my life they were conspicuous by their absence. I should have been able to turn to God for solace, even if I poured out my anguish rather like Job. This experience left me spiritually dead. Hadn't I already had enough knock-out punches in my life? I couldn't even call out to God, let alone know his presence. As for reading his Scripture, it was, and still largely is, impossible. Whereas in the past the Scriptures came alive when I read my Bible, as I found myself at the Sea of Galilee, or in the Garden of Gethsemane, or present at the Last Supper, now it was just words on a page that seemed so trite. The assurances that God offered were not aspects of expressions of love, or total assurance of the rock, they were just lifeless.

As a preacher, I'm not proud of the admission of these feelings, but I'm sure there are many of you out there who have gone through a similar experience but perhaps can't admit it. It takes terrific courage for me to write on a page that the words of Scripture mean nothing.

At this moment, I've no idea whether that feeling will change. This Easter I had my first sensation, in five years, of wanting to go to church. Sadly, circumstances prevented it and I began to think that this was perhaps my own personal penance, for I couldn't just pick God up when I wanted to, and put him down again. Perhaps the starting of this book is an expression of my owning that God is still there.

The strange thing is, that through all my struggle I've been able to maintain prayer for others and do Christian healing by the laying on of hands and by prayer. Yet I haven't been able to pray for myself. Ministers of the church were a very rare breed of people during this period. When they did appear their prayer was very platitudinal, seeming to have little relevance to what I was feeling inside. Long-term illness is not something that the church does well. Normally, people rally round for a few weeks and then expect everything to come out 'all right'. The people who share their life with you know it's going to be a long haul, but they are there because they want to be there. When it is a spiritual long haul and someone is having a spiritual breakdown it's a bit like the situation of a bereavement. Members of the church don't know what to say, and so often they do not know what to do either. Practical help can be so much more important than glib words.

This book will endeavour, and it can only be endeavour, to empathize with you. I can never put myself in your position. I can never experience your particular circumstances, but through my own struggle I can understand where you might be coming from. I can try to address your anger, fears, anguish, pain and suffering, in a way that gets alongside you, and meets you where you are, and not where you are expected to be. I

come from a background of psychotherapeutic counselling, where the silence between counsellor and client can sometimes be so thickly felt that it creates an atmosphere all of its own in the room. Breaking that silence can be very destructive on the one hand, yet therapeutic on the other. The art of counselling is to know what is appropriate and when it is right to do it. Sometimes the silence can be very healing. It is as though you are holding the person's hand. Even though you aren't physically touching them.

I hope that through what I write on these pages I'll be holding your hand, and that together we'll come through and reach the other side.

A thought

Don't try to make things 'all come right'. Just accept that you are where you are at this God-given moment. Sometimes it's necessary just to allow yourself to be, to find that serenity and peace within yourself.

A prayer

Lord, when we cannot feel your presence, don't even want to acknowledge your existence because we hurt so much, help us to find those people around us who can hold us in this difficult situation. Lord, it's so hard to find yourself in a spiritual desert, when nothing has meaning any more. Sometimes, when people talk about the way you are there carrying them, like a footprint that they see in the sand, it so often doesn't feel that you are. When we can't feel that you are there, please, Lord, be there. Give people the courage not to fill the void with words, but allow the space and quietness to grow. So that the person who is hurting may find inner peace and solitude, and thereby eventually find you again. Help us to see, when things happen to us that we don't necessarily understand, that this is part of your rich pattern, and the picture and meaning will reveal itself in the end.

2

The rock

God and Christ were my rock. They were the foundation on which I had built my life. As a child, going backwards and forwards to hospital for examinations and treatment, my life was very problematic. People said I had the mind of an adult, perhaps because I spent much of my life surrounded by adults, most of whom were medics, making their prognosis well within earshot of this impressionable youngster. So to me the future looked bleak. Time and time again, after difficult hospital consultations, Mum and I would pray about what had happened. She gave me a grounding of daily scripture reading and always prayers together at bedtime. This was a natural part of my existence. Sunday worship was always a part of my week. I never liked going into the Sunday School. I wanted to be with the adults in the big church, and listen to the preacher, and take part in the hymn singing. I was bullied at school by the other children, who jeered and mocked me about going to church.

‘Well, tell us what you learnt then.’

And I did. I told them the stories of the Good Samaritan, and the Sower, and the healing miracles. And they listened. I used to go everywhere outside my house on a three-wheeled cycle. This tricycle was my mode of transport, even around the school classroom. At the bottom of our garden, in the East End of London, was a park known as Rocky Park. By some of the modern standards this would have been regarded as breaching health and safety regulations – lots of barbed wire, parallel bars,

concrete and rock boulders. I used to ride my trike around the park, and occasionally sit on the grass. It wasn't uncommon for me to have as many as twenty-six children sitting on the ground in front of me, asking me to tell them about the stories in the Bible. Their ridicule had turned to interest. Was I being prepared for what was to come many years later? I don't know. But it certainly made me used to voice projection and not being afraid to speak in public!

Again, what might appear to the reader as exceptional for a child of eight or nine years old appeared to me to be perfectly normal. My mother had taken me to a healer, and we were part of a prayer circle that took place at eight o'clock every evening. The prayer circle united us with many hundreds of people, who would be praying for healing and help with difficulties of one kind or another, for certain individuals. I realized the power of togetherness, the power of being united in one common cause, namely the love of Christ. I was always mystified by the healing miracles within the Bible, and through those miracles realized the power of human touch, which to my mind is vitally important. Without good touch you cannot have a good relationship. In my opinion there must be human contact and human interaction. You might say: 'Well, you don't have good touch when it comes to your love for Christ – you are not able to reach out and touch him.' Not in a real, physical sense, that is true. But I was touched emotionally; touched in my heart and mind, reaching out in every sense of the word to a life that was rich and full, and not caught up by worldly, materialistic standards – a life that was governed by Christian principles, which told me that whatever happened God would be there for me. Sometimes, due to medical procedures, I found this hard to believe. If God was in this level of pain and fear, where was he? But the mere fact that I could learn to cope with things, sometimes just five minutes at a time, was enough, for there was no point in thinking of the 'big picture', as that might never happen. Five minutes at a time would mean that I might

get through the day, and I certainly did, because as I write this I'm in my sixtieth year. A miracle in itself.

What happens then when your rock is shattered? As I thought about this I had an image of an implosion, or an earthquake, because rocks that have been there for a long time don't normally shatter. But when a disaster strikes, even on the level of a small human one by global standards, it feels like an earthquake and a massive explosion of everything that you hold dear. Nothing seems tangible anymore. All the things that you took for granted suddenly diminish. There is nothing to hold on to, and your world and life seem meaningless. So, what can you do? All you can do is stay with it, and hold on to the pieces of your life that you can still acknowledge. In my case, it was praying for others.

Having a ministry of healing, I know that in weakness there can also be wholeness. In weakness there is also strength, as we saw through Christ's crucifixion. In weakness there can also be a resurrection, a sense of new beginnings and hope. But when things are dark, all you can do is hang on in there, knowing that after a time you will come out on the other side, although it doesn't seem like that when you are immersed in what is happening to you, and you feel totally traumatized by the event. Remember, just five minutes at a time. Even a day, when you are up against it, can seem far too long. When I suffered great pain during surgery, I dealt with it in five-minute chunks, hoping that the next day wouldn't be so bad. It is so difficult when day after day you are immersed in a particular tragedy, or crisis of faith, and it doesn't seem to get any better. In my case, my crisis of faith, as I write this, is something of a thirteen-year period.

I was not capable of praying for me. The only words I could get out were 'Why, Lord? Why did this have to happen? Why did you take away the most precious thing in my life, leaving me a total void?' There have been times when I screamed it at the wall and shouted these words with my head raised to

heaven, not knowing where the help would come from. But amazingly, I'm still here and I'm writing this text, and my solid piece of mountainous rock may now only be a small boulder, but it's still there, and to me that's most important.

A thought

When familiar things that we hold dear are taken from us, or shattered due to an event, it is hard to believe that we will ever recover. But time is a great healer and this is not a cliché. Time will heal. Sometimes it is important to clear away the dead wood before we can rebuild. We have to hold on to the things in our life that give us stability and continuity; then reshape them like the potter and the clay to make a totally new and transformed object. In this case, the object is our life and our fundamental belief and knowledge of the love of Christ. It's difficult at times to believe. But in all aspects of faith it is about trust in the things we cannot see, rather than the things we can. Values and concepts, not materialism, are what matters. The love expressed by one human being to another in genuine friendship and concern becomes our rock when our faith deserts us. The faith is still there, but we can't always see it, or don't always want to see it.

A prayer

Lord, continue to be our rock when all else fails. Continue to be our strength, our firm foundation. Bring the people that we need to help and support us through this dark day. Give us the resolve to keep going, even when we feel like giving up. Help us to find spiritual renewal, mental peace, serenity of spirit, wholeness of mind, even in the darkest days.

3

Steps of faith

At eleven years old I was given the opportunity of a pioneering surgical procedure, which would, it was hoped, enable me to walk. The medical team told me that it would be a very painful procedure, and that if I decided to take the opportunity I would have to be very brave. This is hard for a small child to take on board. It was to be a hamstring transplant operation on both my legs. How could I pass up the opportunity of learning to walk? It would be an incredible challenge, yet would give me the sense of dignity and normality that I longed for. No one wants to be crawling on hands and knees in their teenage years, if it can possibly be avoided. So I went into hospital in February 1962. I can remember that morning as though it were yesterday. Snow was falling in huge flakes, covering the ground quickly in a white blanket. Somehow it seemed very poignant looking out of the lounge window with my two brothers, one on either side of me. All of us forcing back the tears – mine of fear, wondering if I would ever see my home again. At this point in my life I had never been separated from my mother. The prospect of that alone was scary.

I can remember the long walk in my father's arms as we trundled down the hospital corridors. In those days, the smell of pine, Dettol and floor polish was very evident. No neat decoration on the hospital walls, just green tiles that were to be my visual existence for eleven weeks and four days. Remember what I said about five minutes at a time? Well, I learnt this philosophy extremely quickly after this operation, because it was one of the most agonizingly painful experiences I have ever

encountered. To complete the surgery on both legs, together with manipulation (under anaesthetic, because it would be so painful), I had three trips to the operating theatre in a fortnight. This was terrifying and I will never forget that feeling as the gas mask was placed over my face. Perhaps that is why I am claustrophobic now when things are put over my head. My mind always goes back to that moment and I can smell the ether.

Eleven weeks and four days in hospital with the most intense pain was bad enough. But I had a total of six months in plaster from toes to thighs, with a wooden bar between my knees to keep my legs separated during the night. Sleeping was horrendously difficult. When it came to the physiotherapy, when the plaster was cut, and they had to bend the knees for the first time without anaesthetic, I lashed out, hit the physio and screamed violently. If God was there – where was he? This was my crucifixion, my Calvary. But if I was able to walk at the end of it that would be my resurrection.

One year on from the start of the surgery, I took my first steps. Just four. But they were my giant leap for mankind. All of my family members were there in the lounge of my home. We ended up in a heap, hugging each other. What joy – twelve years of pain and struggle, but I'd made it. The world was my oyster. I would be able to walk, albeit slowly and painfully on tripod sticks. What a victory.

All the efforts of my parents were coming to glorious fruition. It had been worth all the sacrifices that they had had to make. My parents' life, as a couple, had been put on hold while Mum chased me backwards and forwards to hospitals three times a week for physiotherapy, as well as other hospital appointments. Through my efforts they had their reward, and it was a wonderful moment for us all. I cannot begin to express what it's like suddenly to have the sensation of standing on your own, albeit with sticks to support you, and to realize that you can move independently and make your own decisions as to

where you will go and what you want to do, rather than being reliant on others.

My world would now take off. This was a great confidence booster. But tragedy was to strike yet again, taking away what confidence I had. This victory was not without cost, for the physical pain that I endured during the surgery caused me to have a mental breakdown. I spent the next two and a half years on tranquillizers. I used to feel terribly fearful when my mother left me, and I couldn't wait for her to return. Whether the breakdown was due to the pain, or all the anaesthetic, I guess we will never know. This new-found situation meant the security of my world had suddenly been taken away, and through my own particular vulnerability I then had to rebuild things again, which wasn't easy. Nothing we do in life is without cost, but sometimes you have to go through trauma to find success.

A thought

When we are consumed by fear we have to put our trust in the things that we hold dear. That may be particular people. If they are not there we have to be reliant on something at a higher level. If this is God, what a privilege. This story is living proof that out of trauma can come joy. Yet nothing is without a price. The price in this case was pain, suffering and isolation. Time did heal, but healing cannot be rushed.

A prayer

Lord, there will be many people suffering physical pain and emotional anguish for one reason or another. Help them through the chaos of pain and suffering to know that you are there, to feel your hand upon them, strengthening, guiding and blessing. Help those people not to be traumatized by the experience that they are facing. Help them to be outward looking, willing to face the future, reaching out to whatever opportunity comes their way. Sometimes, Lord, the pain people experience is emotional pain. This is nonetheless real. It causes as much anguish

Steps of faith

as physical pain, sometimes more. Help them to find ways of dealing with the emotional anguish, of reconciling it to themselves, of learning, through the anguish, ways in which they can grow and be strong to face the rest of their lives.

4

A change to my world

I had learnt to walk at the age of thirteen, and I started to enjoy the freedom of movement. I had been partially sighted all my life due to oxygen damage of the eyes at birth. I had gone to an ophthalmic hospital for my usual check-up. The doctor seemed to take an incredibly long time to examine my right eye.

‘Your little girl is very brave,’ the doctor said to my mum.

‘Yes, she’s a fighter,’ was Mum’s response.

‘And she’s going to need a whole lot more courage too,’ he said.

Alarm bells started ringing in my head. Especially when I heard the words ‘We’ll have to admit her.’ Examinations under anaesthetic showed that I had a detached retina. Doctors told me that I would be totally blind within three months. I didn’t take it in at first, because I had a thumping headache from the examinations. I suppose I was numbed by this statement. After all, what did it really mean and what was my life going to be like? I’d had two years of freedom and movement, and now at fifteen years old, with deteriorating vision, I was afraid to move. This realization was quite shocking. Further examinations took place and, as I waited to go down to the operating theatre yet again, I started to pray.

‘Please Lord, let it all come right,’ I prayed. ‘Let the original diagnosis be wrong.’ I lay in my hospital bed shaking with fear, praying through the night. And then the words ‘Take this cup away from me’ came into my head. Of course, at that time, I

