



You, yourself

A woman married to the pastor

By Ann Benton

Introduction

How to be part of the package and not feel stitched up - that's the conundrum. I would argue that a pastor's wife is part of the package, because she covenanted before God to do life together with the man she married.

Not feeling stitched up will only happen when you stop fighting with what you see as restrictions on your individual freedom. A person who gives herself freely is not stitched up. That is the joyous magic of the 'buy one, get one free' jibe. How do I dare to say that? Because of Matthew 10:8: 'Freely you have received, freely give.'

I am not going to pretend that this is anything but sacrifice. But think Romans 12:1. 'I appeal to you therefore brothers and sisters, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.' Isn't offering your body (yes, actual hands, feet, brain, mouth) as a living sacrifice the right and proper response to the mercies God has generously showered on us in Jesus?

However, the thing about living sacrifices, as the quip goes, is that they are inclined to keep getting off the altar. There must, therefore, be a daily aspect to this offering. Now, when that goes on for years, without human recognition, we can find (us get-one-free people) if we are not very careful, that as W. B. Yeats wrote, 'too long a sacrifice can make a stone of the heart.'¹ When Paul encouraged believers in Galatia (6:9) not to become weary in well-doing good, he knew all about that.

Just for you

So, this message is about and for you, pastor's wife. Some of you have told me that you frequently feel overwhelmed and are running on empty. You want to do the right thing, but the task seems enormous, the pressures on you (real or imagined) immense and the demands on you from family, workplace and church relentless. Not to mention circumstances like illness, grief, poverty, disappointments, which beset all humanity in a fallen world.

There are different levels of exhaustion. At t one level the expedient of a warm bath and an early night can help. As can a holiday. But let us dig deeper.

¹ From the poem, *Easter 1916*

Chapter 1: How to stay fresh?

This is a good question. Let me make three suggestions.

1. Simplify

Weddings these days have become productions akin to a Hollywood blockbuster. Pre-wedding nerves used to refer to anxiety about the wedding night. Now it's all about shoes for the eight bridesmaids, pew ends, and whom to invite to the various levels of reception and where to seat them. I once met up with an exhausted and tearful bride to be. When I probed a little, I discovered she was sitting up every night, writing, with exquisite calligraphy, the name of each of the 120 guests on cards to mark their seating place at the reception. Each card was then decorated with a hand-pressed wild-flower. I did not know whether to be impressed or horrified, but I leant in the direction of the latter. It was as though she had lost sight of the central point of the event: to invite friends to witness the making of a solemn but happy covenant before God between herself and the man she loved. All the trappings which were exhausting her emotionally and physically were expectations *she had laid on herself*. And they were not necessary.

We might all smile or throw up our hands in horror at such foolishness. But sometimes in our endeavours for the Lord, we can over-elaborate and over-complicate matters.

Take hospitality for example. What after all, is the point, the essence? It is surely the open door, the extended hand of friendship, the engendering of a sincere welcome. Certainly, food can be involved, but did anyone mention fine dining? The point is not to impress your guests with your cuisine, cookery skills, crockery or cutlery. Away with such showing off. In a busy period of life, remember there are shops which sell ready-made, tasty food. Remember there is tea and toast. Or there is the strategy I learned from one wise, ministry wife: do the same menu every Sunday, so that you can produce it like clockwork and release energy for more important things than poring over a recipe and rummaging for rare ingredients.

'Better a dish of vegetables with love than a fattened calf with hatred.' Proverbs 15:17

What I am saying is that sometimes we set the bar ourselves and we set it too high, unnecessarily high. Perhaps that was what Peter was hinting at when he reminded believers to offer hospitality without grumbling, 1Peter 4:9. Keep it simple and keep the main thing the main thing so that you can genuinely smile as you focus on your

guests, not hoping they will cancel or leave early. It's tiredness that makes us grumpy old women and sometimes we do it to ourselves.

Simplify. This principle can apply to other aspects of ministry as well. I don't mean shoddiness or scruffiness. But doing things more simply can mean doing things better, whether it is the decor for Holiday Bible Club or the cake selection at the seniors' tea party. You might do well to take a ruthless approach to unnecessary trimmings.

2. Slow down

Sometimes ministry wives think they have to say 'yes' to everything or respond to every need by rushing to visit/meet/invite. You don't. Keep hold of the concept of pace.

You are in a long-distance race, not a sprint. When you watch the athletics World Championships you will hear commentators talking about those who run an intelligent race. These are the runners who have a plan about how they will make it to the finish line and thus be in contention for a medal. Normally, that does not mean going off like a rocket at the starter's gun.

In pastoral life, pace-setting is an equally important concept. You will have many strands to your life and they need to be kept in balance: husband, children, paid work, church, community, wider family, exercising your gifts, rest. If when you review the past week, say, you find that one of these has consumed all your time while others have been totally neglected, then there is a lack of balance.

Since our Creator has put rhythm into the universe (day and night, moon and tides, seasons, Sabbath, it would seem to be a great idea to plan a rhythm to your own life, Use a diary with intent. For example, set aside just one day a week for works of mercy, like visiting or meeting up. But no more. That might mean that when you see a need to which you believe it would be right to respond, you do not raise the expectations of the one you are helping by going in too hard at the outset. Play the game too hard and you get stale, is a sporting expression which has application here. Maybe you don't need to visit each week. Needy people can be manipulative and make you think you are the only one helping (which is flattering to you) when in fact further investigation will reveal that loads of people are on the case. Pace yourself and balance out your life with plenty of breathing space.

'Do not be over-righteous, neither be over-wise - why destroy yourself?' Ecclesiastes 7:16

'Is it possible to be over-righteous?' a devout Christian might ask. Yes, I think it is. Perhaps you have been part of a church where there is a person who determines to be first on the premises at a church event and has done everything before the other helpers turn up at the appointed time. This same person stays until the last crumb is swept up at the end of the day, despite encouragement to go home and put her feet up. Then she will let everyone know how pathetic was the contribution of others on the team. 'If I didn't do it, it wouldn't get done.' But no one else had a chance. Don't be that person.

Slow down. (You move too fast!) Breathe. Take a beat. Stand and stare. Love people, enjoy the moment. God loves a cheerful giver.

3. Sink your roots deeply into God and his word

It might seem too obvious to be saying read your Bible and pray more. Perhaps you are fed up with hearing that, and the fact that it comes up in every other sermon you hear. Busy people tend to roll their eyes and prevaricate with, 'if you knew my schedule...' When they do so they are dismissing the thing that will really make a difference. If you are a woman who is permanently tired and from whom more and more is required, you need to know that all the helpful strategies in the world, like my suggestions above, will fail to meet your deep-seated need for refreshment unless you recognise the source of real strength.

Chapter 2: Two psalms to guide you

Here's a suggestion as to where to sink those roots of yours.

Psalm 1, the first psalm paints a stark black and white picture: God's way or the highway – the broad one that leads to destruction. And God's way is discovered through God's word. Psalm 119 lays that on with a spade, and the imagery found in those two psalms is instructive.

- **You are a plant that needs a root.**

Interestingly, Psalm 1 starts with a negative, where not to get your worldview:

'Blessed is the one whom does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers.'

There is a kind of spiral here from walking to standing to sitting - a progression of involvement from the casual to the committed. Is the Bible telling us here to have nothing to do with our non-Christian neighbours? Of course not! Jesus ate with tax-collectors and sinners, Luke 15.1. This is not about whether or not to have a cup of tea with the lesbian from over the road, or with the militant atheist at the school gate. It is a warning against absorbing, quite unconsciously probably, their worldviews until ultimately they merge with your own. Your unbelieving friends may be delightful; their way is that there is much to enjoy in secular media – films, books blogs etc. But you must be awake to the likelihood that since their basic assumptions about life are frankly erroneous, their ideas and advice are likely to be anything but godly. You will not find reasons to be cheerful there. They are doctrines of despair behind a confident coat and they will wear you down and rob you of joy. In every interface with our secular neighbours we must stay awake, engage our brains and resist the mindset in rebellion against God.

You might expect the next verse of Psalm 1 to say that instead of relaxing in the company of mockers, the blessed one walks with the godly, hangs out with saints and sits in the company of enthusiastic believers. But excellent as that practice might be in a general way, it is not the recommended antidote. It is not keeping up with the latest Christian blogs or podcasts, going to certain conferences or reading the recommended titles that will do the business. It is so much simpler:

'.. but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night.'

Accept no substitute. If the delight has gone out of your Bible reading, don't give up on it. On the contrary, plan to make its setting more conducive by ruthlessly protecting some time for it in a comfortable place, with an attitude of excitement to meet with your God and hear what he has to say.

It is only in Scripture that you will find the truth and the hope which will, in more ways than you can explain or imagine, strengthen you for the tasks ahead. Your worldview will be shaped and corrected. Scripture sets us right; it is a light to enable us to get a correct perspective on what is going on in our lives, in the world and in history. Even if you just study one verse, repeat it to yourself, take it in, chew it over, return to it during the day and turn it into prayer. Meditating day and night does not mean that you never do anything else. The expression could be taken to mean 'at the entrance of the day and the night' i.e., first thing in the morning and last thing at night. That's a good habit. Or it might mean that the blessed one returns to the word of God at any time during the day or night. Any time is a good time.

- **You are a tree that wants to fruit**

Psalm 1 is telling us the secret of a refreshed and fruitful life. Shun the counsel of the ungodly and sink your roots into God's word. Like a tree by a river, you will flourish because you have this continuous source of refreshment. This is an underground, unseen work. This tree, v3, yields its fruit in season. There is no continual harvest. A tree does not bear fruit in winter or spring. Would we say the water supply is useless because there is no fruit at those times? No, the last thing the tree needs is to be uprooted from its prime position by the river and put somewhere else. There will be a harvest. Keep sending the roots down.

- **You are a baby who needs to grow**

A baby needs a suitable diet in order to grow and so do believers. Pastors' wives also need to grow in grace. God's word is the diet you need. It is the pure spiritual milk which Peter commends in 1Peter2:2. There are so many rules for new mothers about what a baby should and shouldn't have and when, but no one doubts the importance of breast milk (or its equivalent) which contains all the nutrients a baby needs to grow. However, it would be odd to meet an adult who lived solely on milk. In Hebrews 5 the reader is reminded that a believer should be moving on metaphorically to solid food, going deeper into Scripture. That is how we will grow and mature and stay fresh. Not only will such a diet refresh, it will also refine, increasing not intellectual knowledge but moral discernment. A good diet, as doctors will testify, is the key to a healthy life.

'You are my portion, Lord.' Psalm 119:57

He is found in his word. So, feed.

- **You are a stranger who needs to know**

‘I am a stranger on earth; do not hide your commands from me.’ Psalm 119:19

This is an image taken up by New Testament writers. As believers in our Lord Jesus, we don't belong here and we need help to navigate our way. Sometimes, those who have been Christians a long time or are experienced in Christian ministry might forget that and think that our track record and experience will be sufficient to get us through the challenges of the day or the week or the year. This was the mistake made by the unnamed 'man of God from Judah' whose tragic story is told in 1Kings 13. He was courageous enough to take on King Jeroboam and confront with devastating force Jeroboam's setting up of God-substitute idolatrous worship centres, but he was deceived and derailed by a silly old prophet to neglect God's clear instruction to not hang about in Bethel but to head off for home straight away. Those who minister God's word are not above God's word. On the contrary, we must be the first to follow God's instructions. We can never neglect God's word to ourselves and think we no longer need it or that it is just for other people.

- **You are a watch that needs to be wound**

‘Though I am like a wineskin in the smoke, I do not forget your decrees.’ Psalm 119:83

This is one of the most intriguing images in the psalm. A wineskin in the smoke is surely cracked, used up, dry, almost beyond its useful life. The writer in this section describes himself as finished. There are times in ministry like that, when we feel everything is going wrong and everything is against us. Life is a messy business and sometimes we are truly stuck in the mud. What will help us then? God's unfailing love, v88 and God's eternal word, v89. The former is found in, and underpinned by, the latter. Before the invention of digital watches, there were the ones you had to wind every night. When I was given my first wristwatch I was taught to make that winding a daily routine. I suppose the modern equivalent is putting the mobile phone on charge every night. We wine skins in the smoke need regular rescue and repair by God's word. We need to be wound up to run for another day.

- **You are a sheep that needs to be found.**

Reading Psalm 119 might make you picture the writer as a pretty perfect believer, so grounded in God's word, so resolute in following God's ways. But note now the psalm ends with a frank confession of frailty and failure:

'I have strayed like a lost sheep. Seek your servant, for I have not forgotten your commands.'

He hasn't forgotten God's commands, but he still knows he goes astray. 'Prone to wander' as the hymn aptly puts it. God's word exposes that and pricks us. It is sharper than any double-edged sword. Hebrews 4:12. We find that our thoughts and attitudes are very far from what they should be. We stand rebuked and corrected sometimes, as well as comforted and inspired. And that is for our good. But note how the psalmist instead of wallowing in self-loathing, turns that recognition into a prayer that God would find him again. Send up your flare. God will not ignore it.

A weary pastor's wife can be refreshed and be like that olive tree flourishing in the house of God, Psalm 52:8. As you continue your race, notice the one standing by the track holding out a bottle of water.

'On the last and greatest day of the feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them'. John 7.37-38.

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