

# Running the final lap, Keswick Convention 2023

## Session 2. Finding support: dependence and frailty

“.....So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For our light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen, For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.” (2 Corinthians 4:16-18)

### 1. We are designed to be dependent

Many Christian old people are determined to be self-reliant and they are fearful of “becoming a burden to others”. But this attitude has much more to do with the secular Enlightenment concept of being an “autonomous” individual than with authentic Christian thinking.

Dependence is not a consequence of the Fall; it is part of our creation. God chooses to take his glorious image and embody it in a creature made out of dust. The Hebrew word for human *adam* is derived from *adamah*, the ground. We are ‘groundlings’. We are designed to be frail, dependent, limited, vulnerable and contingent.

Not only are we designed to depend on God, we are designed to depend on one another. We are created to be bonded together in lives of mutual dependence. God has placed us in families, and in a Christian family, linked together in mutual dependence. So our Christian calling is to lives of “*mutual burdensomeness*”. “Bear one another’s burdens and so you will fulfil the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2)

“Is this not in large measure what it means to belong to a family: to burden each other—and to find, almost miraculously, that others are willing, even happy, to carry such burdens?” Gilbert Meilaender. This is true for a human family, and it should be true too for the Christian family, the local church.

Many Christians continue to worry about what their dependence may mean to their loved-ones, and they are painfully aware of the apparent inadequacies of government-provided health and social care. These are issues we need to discuss openly amongst ourselves, and before the crisis strikes.

### 2. Jesus, God in human form, made himself dependent for us

God in human form was born as a pathetic, fragile baby. He could do nothing for himself. He needed human arms to cuddle him, clothe him, clean him and keep him warm. He needed a human mother to feed him. He entrusted his entire existence to fallible human beings.

And he voluntarily handed over his authority to others at the end of his life.

“In John’s Gospel, alone among the Gospels, there is no transfiguration of Jesus upon a hill top – no moment when chosen witnesses have a brief glimpse, a brief visual perception of who he really is and are overwhelmed by what they perceive. In John’s Gospel the transfiguration of Jesus is, so to speak, transferred to the Garden of Gethsemane at the moment when he is handed over, and those who are overwhelmed by it and bear witness to it by falling to the ground are the men who have come to take him into their hands. It is as Jesus is handed over, as he enters into passion, that the ultimate dimension of the divine glory becomes manifest in him and evident to men.” William Vanstone

Through this strange and wonderful paradox we can catch glimpses of a deep truth. To be dependent on others is not a degrading and dehumanising process. In the painful reality of dependence we experience a tiny reflection of what God out of love chose for himself. Christ’s divine status and dignity was in no

way impaired by his dependence. In fact, through his dependence, his divine glory was displayed to all, including those who wished him harm.

### **3. God's glory can be revealed in our dependence**

At the end of John's Gospel Jesus tells Peter that he too is going to display the glory of God as he is handed over to others:

"...Jesus said, "Feed my sheep. Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which **Peter would glorify God**. Then he said to him, "Follow me!" (John 21:17-19)

Suffering and glory are always twinned together in the Scriptures and in Christian experience. They are two sides of the same coin.

We must not sentimentalise or glamourize dependence. The reality is frequently painful, distressing, and frustrating, and our dependence on others may feel humiliating. It's painful to watch others whom you love struggle with the load of caring for you. If I can say it reverently, the experience of dependence was not easy for Jesus either. But his example teaches us that our dignity, our status, our identity as a person, cannot be lost, damaged or demeaned by dependence. Nothing can take away our status as a beloved princess or prince of the Most High. And we too, by God's grace, may experience something of the glory...

"There is an essential humility that makes us willing to be served. Christians should have learned at the time of their salvation that they can do nothing to save themselves but are totally dependent on God. Throughout life a desire for self-sufficiency can impair spiritual growth. At the end of life, it is good to be less self-sufficient and trust God more fully." John Dunlop

### **4. The balance between freedom and dependence**

As human beings we are created for freedom as well as dependence. So we should always aim to exercise our own God-given freedom, to choose to live in godly ways, to choose wisely. And as carers we should aim to protect, encourage and facilitate the freedom of those we care for, those who are dependent on us. We aim to respect their right to choose as far as it is possible. But as we enter into the final lap of our race, we are called gradually and voluntarily to give up our freedom to others; to 'let go' progressively and graciously rather than to have our freedom ripped away from us against our will. Easier said than done.....!!

"Many of the losses associated with ageing are inevitable and often forced upon us, but some things we can choose to give up voluntarily. When we can see the losses coming, I have observed that it is much better to recognize them, plan for them, and make changes somewhat gradually and proactively rather than waiting for a crisis to force a drastic change". John Dunlop

### **5. Contentment**

"Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it." 1 Timothy 6:6

"I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content." Philippians 4:11

"I would not say that I am happy, but I am learning to be content..." John Stott in his final months.

**What are old people for?** Here are some of the activities of the previous list which we can continue despite physical dependence:

- **Prayerfulness**, especially for the younger generations
- **Expressing gratitude and thankfulness** - especially for the smaller and frequently ignored blessings of creation, family and human friendship
- **Providing positive models of 'letting go' graciously**
- **Hopefulness** - constantly pointing to the resurrection and new creation
- **Leaving behind a legacy of wisdom and a testimony to God's character and faithfulness over a long life.**

### **Some resources**

*The Final Lap: Navigating the transitions of later life.* John Wyatt, 10ofthose  
*Matters of Life and Death: Human Dilemmas in the Light of the Christian Faith (2<sup>nd</sup> edition).*

John Wyatt, IVP

*Finishing well: A God's eye view of ageing.* Ian Knox, SPCK

*The Gift of Years: Growing old gracefully.* Joan Chittister, Bluebridge

*Hope in the face of suffering.* Jeremy Marshall, 10Publishing

'*I Want to Burden My Loved Ones*', Gilbert Meilaender *First Things*,  
March 2010, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2010/03/i-wantto-burden-my-loved-ones>

*Faith in Later Life: resource hub*, <https://faithinlaterlife.org/resource-hub>

More resources at [johnwyatt.com](http://johnwyatt.com)

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