

NEWLY UPDATED



IN THE PALM OF
GOD'S HAND
A diary of living against the odds

WENDY BRAY



'Her story will bring hope and strength to all who read it'

STEVE CHALKE MBE

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INTRODUCTION

When I was a small boy in Sunday school, we sang the same song almost every week. Even now, over 40 years later, if I close my eyes and imagine, I fancy I can hear its strains coming from the little chapel on the corner of my street:

*Climb, climb up sunshine mountain, heavenly breezes blow;
Climb, climb up sunshine mountain, faces all aglow.
Turn, turn your back on doubting, looking to the sky;
Climb, climb up sunshine mountain, you and I.*

It's a lovely picture: you can feel the sun on your back as you journey, and just in case it gets too hot there's an occasional heavenly breeze. There are two of us, so there is no loneliness and, for good measure, doubts are a thing of the past.

I am glad my Sunday school teacher taught me that song—children need images that convey security and safety. What is a little harder to understand is why some of us can go through a whole adult life of Christian teaching—hundreds of sermons, conferences and books—without anybody telling us that sometimes, halfway up the mountain, the weather changes to an icy wind, doubts come hurtling over the horizon and, just as they do, we turn around to find that the friend who had been at our shoulder a moment ago has slipped back down the mountain during the storm. We are isolated, hurting, scared and seemingly alone.

But are we really alone? And here is where the crucial issues begin to surface. If God is just the Lord of 'sunshine mountain', if he exists to make me happy, to answer all my prayers with 'Yes', ensuring that my friends or my children never break my heart, that my firm never 'down-sizes' me, and that my body remains healthy, I can only love him when times are good.

But what if there is another possibility? What if he is the God not just of the mountain but of the valley? What if there are times in life when he

allows me to know crushing pain, when my prayers seem unanswered and when the darkness seems suffocating? What if he not only loves me but suffers with me—cries with me, holds me sobbing to his chest as I cry out, ‘Even in the valley of the shadow of death, you are with me?’

There will come times for each of us when we will find out for ourselves whether we love God because he looks after us, or simply because he is God.

We may find ourselves among those who say, ‘I can’t believe in a God who would let our holiday be ruined’ or, at the other end of the spectrum, we may find ourselves with those who, like Job of old, see their life broken and yet manage to stutter out, through the grief that racks their body, ‘Even though he slay me, yet will I trust in him.’

Occasionally God gives us a rare privilege. He allows us to gaze for a while into the life, even the soul, of another person. He did it with Job. As we watch life unfolding for that man, we catch ourselves holding our breath as we wonder how he will react. We ask in our hearts, ‘What would I have done?’ Well, here is another privilege. Wendy Bray has decided to open her life and soul to us. As she says herself, there are no guarantees; she does not know how all this will turn out. And her diary is deliberately published without a happy end. You and I can watch daily how somebody who loves God copes with the massive shock that he has allowed her to contract cancer and, along with it, to have to bear the everyday frustrations, like delayed scan results, or the people who assume her baldness is the protest of an anarchist instead of the evidence of a woman battling for life.

There are often passages of incredible poignancy. One day she writes, ‘I have just read two whole chapters of *Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator* to my son... without coughing once! What an achievement. I haven’t been able to do that in months.’ And, as one would expect with Wendy, there are moments of helpless laughter: ‘What a hilarious morning. The wig fits. But it swings round my cheekbones like a final curtain at the opera. The children took one look at it, burst out laughing and chuckled all the way through *Blue Peter*. I’ll put it on when we need a laugh.’

Near the end of her diary we read this: ‘I feel very fragile today. Bewildered. Yet I cannot shut you out. I can do nothing but trust you.’

And I suppose, at its heart, this is a book about trust. Not the kind of trust that says, 'I know that soon it will be all right again', but rather the kind that trusts God—anyway—sometimes because there is just nowhere else to go.

Wendy makes me laugh, and she makes me cry. And when life is so hard that it almost crushes me, she asks me if I love God... *anyway*. Wendy, I pray with all my heart that you will be well again. I want you to know the strength and energy you had when you ushered Jonathan Booth and me on that ridiculous bike ride from John O'Groats to Land's End. But whatever the future holds, I want to thank you for sharing your journey with me; I will remember it in my valley. It will encourage me to press on. And it will bring me hope.

Rob Parsons

—— *Part One* ——

THE BEGINNING

HOW IT ALL BEGAN ...

During the early months of 1999 I began to take seriously some niggling symptoms—mainly because my husband Richard and my two children Lois and Benjamin nagged me! During the previous summer I had co-driven the support van for a nationwide cycle ride for *Care for the Family*, the charity for which I work. I'd had the time of my life, but struggled throughout with a dreadful virus which left a persistent dry cough and tiredness. At the end of the ride I asked God for the next challenge.

I would never have imagined that challenge would be cancer! I was not in any high-risk group and had generally been healthy. Cancer was an illness which 'other people' got. But God knew otherwise. And out of his knowledge has unfolded a time of tears and frustration, unexpected laughter and joy, and an intimate dialogue with a loving heavenly Father. But there have also been times of deep confusion, emotional rawness and physical pain which have left me shocked by their intensity.

I am sure there will be more to come, for this journey is not yet at an end. The days ahead may seem filled with uncertainty, but they are not uncertain to God. The truth is that we can only ever assume that we have a certain number of days ahead. Our times really are in God's hand.

The last months have also been something of a learning curve. I have learnt that I haven't truly been living with a heavenly perspective, that I need to face earlier death and accept its strong possibility in order to really live. I have also learnt just how much I am loved. Not just by friends and family but most importantly by the God who continues to sustain me throughout and who keeps me 'in the palm of his hand'.

WEDNESDAY 24 FEBRUARY, EVENING

Richard's concern is justified, I think. This pain has continued on and off for weeks and the parade of symptoms marching with it are not very smart. I needed to do something, so I saw a GP at the surgery this morning. She couldn't find any signs or sounds of infection but gave me some antibiotics and sent me to Derriford Hospital in Plymouth to have a chest X-ray 'just in case'. The results will be with her in a week or so.

Doubtless by then the antibiotics will have done their job. She also suggested that some indigestion remedy might be all that's needed. I am obviously not communicating this well. I don't know what this is, but I *can* tell her it isn't the result of one too many onion bhajis last night!

THURSDAY 25 FEBRUARY

It's 9.30am. Half an hour ago the telephone rang. It was the chest clinic at Derriford. I thought maybe they'd accidentally X-rayed my knee or forgotten to put film in the 'camera', but it's worse than that. They have 'found something' on the X-ray. (Found what? A mouse? A cheque for a cool two million? An onion bhaji?) Would I please attend for an emergency appointment at 3.40pm on Monday, when they'll tell me what it is. Bye for now. Have a nice day. Obviously the staff at the chest clinic don't have weekends as we know them in which to worry, panic and generally imagine the worst! I have phoned Lisa in the office and asked her to pass on the message to pray. (Perfect timing that the office have a prayer time on Thursday mornings!) Also rang Richard in floods of tears, doing a convincing impersonation of a gibbering wreck. Won't really help him feel much better. I'm sure the 'found something' is just a little something. (Am I?) It is a mouse, then. This wait will give an alternative meaning to the phrase 'long weekend'.

FRIDAY 26 FEBRUARY, MORNING

Woken by pain in the night. It was so bad that I was sitting up in bed, rocking and doing the breathing exercises I had used in labour. Staggered out of bed and found some high-strength pain-killers. They didn't even touch the pain! Got back to sleep about four when it eased off. Felt very frightened indeed. Eyes kept filling with tears as I muttered to myself to stop being silly. Dear R slept on beside me. Really should have woken him up, but couldn't see the point in both of us being scared. Just kept praying, 'Lord, whatever this is, give me what I need to cope with it.' I think the cup of tea just before four probably did the trick in the end!

Ought to get the house cleaned today and do some work, but it's hard to concentrate. I did manage to write a book review last night. Getting involved in writing does help to take my mind off things. We're out to the Lord Mayor's dinner tonight. (R's charity contacts!) Then tomorrow R is to stay overnight in Bristol for Julian's stag do. He's hesitating about leaving me as he's so worried, but I've urged him to go and enjoy himself. It will be good for him and I'd hate Julian to be disappointed.

Rebecca Manley Pippert's book² this morning refers to a couple of verses from Deuteronomy (20:3b–4) that I maybe ought to adopt as mine: 'Do not be faint-hearted or afraid; do not be terrified or give way to panic. For the Lord your God is the one who goes with you to fight...' Terribly out of context, as I'm not exactly about to enter a battle—as far as I know. But it seems appropriate. Especially the giving way to panic. Keep seeing a little picture of Corporal Jones in *Dad's Army*, waving his arms and shouting, 'Don't panic! Don't panic!'

Lord, I'm wondering what's ahead. It's beginning to be apparent that you may know something about this that I don't. But I won't panic.

SATURDAY 27 FEBRUARY

No pain last night. Thank you, Lord! There is still a strange sensation and the odd twinge, but nothing like before. I had a good lie in this morning after our late night with the Lord Mayor(!) and because I'm still feeling dreadfully tired. The odd bit of socializing wears me out. The not so odd socializing does too! Not good for my image as 'Original Party Girl' at the office! The meal last night was good and it was rather amusing to see all the pomp and circumstance. Prayed a quick, silly prayer that I would win a raffle prize—and I did! Not the TV or the champagne, the holiday vouchers or the painting, but a 1/4lb box of chocolates. It cost less than the ticket. R was very amused, as I always moan that I never win... then I win the very last prize on the list of about two hundred. Lord, your sense of humour is beyond a joke sometimes. Please stop it. (Don't mean that really!)

SUNDAY 28 FEBRUARY

Only minimal pain last night. And no R to disturb with my tossing, turning and sweating, anyway. He was busy terrorizing the streets of Bristol with Julian on his stag night. Will seem odd going to church without him this morning. Especially in this limbo state.

I realize what a quiet tower of strength he is to me on days like this.

MONDAY 1 MARCH, MORNING

Church yesterday seemed like a social club we weren't members of. Maybe because I was absorbed with sticky issues and found it superficial. R is back, safe and sound. Bristol is still standing.

Nice big row with Lois this morning. She seems to think that when she runs out of tights she can just help herself to mine. Oh, how comforting that the little irritations of life still dominate. That whatever the news is today I will still have a twelve-year-old daughter who pinches my tights! I'm not worried about the chest clinic appointment. (You're not?) Surely they'll just confirm the end of a chest infection or an empyema. Seven years ago I had pneumonia which developed into an empyema. It's possible that this condition—a fluid-filled sac on the lung—might be the 'found something' on my X-ray. Dr JR looked after me well then; maybe he will now.

Maybe I need a week or two's rest. I certainly feel pretty tired and unhealthy. It's crept on so gradually that it's been easy to dismiss it. But when I think about it, I do look and feel awful!

TUESDAY 2 MARCH, MORNING

R came with me to the chest clinic and waited in the waiting-room. I saw a not terribly communicative young doctor who talked to me (but mostly to the desk) about the choice of possible diagnoses almost as if he was asking me to choose a holiday. He showed me the X-ray. It was very pretty! But I suppose it isn't meant to be. My lungs are decorated with lots of white, fluffy dandelion clocks. The dandelions are not good news, evidently.

'Sharing a diary like this is... like taking your clothes off in public in mid-January and asking passers-by to throw snowballs at you... But here I am, doing it... Whatever good might result is God's to reveal. I would hope that it will involve glory to him and comfort and encouragement to others, as well as providing the occasional laugh.'

In the Palm of God's Hand, Christian Book Awards 'Biography of the Year' (2002), is the story of Wendy's journey through long and gruelling treatment for Hodgkin's lymphoma and shows God's love and mercy breaking through in the hardest of times. In this new edition, she tells of how she later received—unbelievably—a diagnosis of an entirely unrelated breast cancer.

Wendy Bray is a freelance writer and newspaper columnist, who has written several books including *The Art of Waiting* (BRF, 2004). A popular speaker at Spring Harvest, she is currently developing her work in the area of positive cancer survivorship through The One Life Company.

'An honest daily account of real, often raw, emotions'

FIONA CASTLE

'At its heart, this is a book about trust'

ROB PARSONS

'You will laugh, cry, ache and be led to a place of full assurance that God cares continually for his people'

DIRECTION MAGAZINE

'The book is both enriching and practical, a very good read for those who have been where Wendy is, and for those just embarking on the journey'

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