

DAILY BIBLE READING GUIDE



CHURCH
matters

STPETERSTAMWORTH

Church matters

I like the play on words 'Church matters'! The Lord loves his Church, it *matters* to him enormously because he gave up his life for his bride, that is his body the Church. As a result there are certain *matters* that the Lord wants his Church, his people, to know. This series of daily devotions will reflect on what these Church matters are. If you have been saved by the Lord, you are a member of his precious Church, you matter to him and he wants you to know what matters for you in his Church.

- Set aside time (15-30 minutes) in your day to meditate on the passages proposed and to talk to your Lord. You can tick off the days you have done as you work through these. If you are married, you could do this with your spouse each morning as you start your day.

These verses will also be part of the sermon series and studied in more depth in our Growth Groups in second term. Using this guide will be a good way for you to get more out of Growth Groups and Church gatherings and will help you to be a blessing to others.

Yours sincerely, Xavier



	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5
Week of 19-23rd April					
Week of 26-30th April					
Week of 3rd-7th May					
Week of 10-14th May					

<p>Day 1</p>	<p>Mission matters for God's church I</p>	
<p>READ: Ephesians 1:3-6</p> <p>3 Blessed is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavens in Christ. 4 For he chose us in him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless in love before him. 5 He predestined us to be adopted as sons through Jesus Christ for himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, 6 to the praise of his glorious grace that he lavished on us in the Beloved One.</p>	<p>REFLECT: Welcome to our series on Church matters. At St Peter's we want to be a Church which is on about mission. This is one of the purposes for each member of God's Church. We are to be disciple making disciples. This is one of the ways in which we magnify the name of our Lord. Mission has always been at the very heart of God's purposes in the world. Have a look at the verses from Ephesians:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where do you see the theme of mission present in these verses? • When did God's mission plan begin? <p>In these verses Paul takes us to God's purposes in eternity, before God created anything. Notice that if you have put your faith in Christ, this is because God chose you before he made anything. He had you in mind. This is a mind-blowing thought and reveals the great purpose God has for you and your enormous value in his sight.</p> <p>Did you also notice that when he chose you in his mind, it was so that you would be holy and blameless before him. This suggests that when he chose you in his purposes, he did so knowing you weren't holy, you weren't blameless - he chose you 'to be' these things. Yet his mission was to make you these things in his sight. He did this in his love for you. He did this for the praise of his glorious grace. To magnify God in mission, is to recognise that God has chosen you, not because of anything you have done, but simply out of his unmerited generosity to you. Acknowledging God's mission in this way and to thank him for what he has done is a way of magnifying his name.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent do you magnify your Lord for doing this for you? <p>PRAY: Thank you heavenly Father for choosing me in Christ before you made anything. Thank you that in choosing me, you chose me not as one who was holy or blameless, but as one who would need your grace and mercy. Thank you for your extraordinary kindness to me a sinner. Amen</p>	
<p>Day 2</p>	<p>Mission matters for God's church II</p>	
<p>READ: Genesis 3:14-16</p> <p>So the Lord God said to the serpent: Because you have done this, you are cursed more than any livestock and more than any wild animal. You will move on your belly and eat dust all the days of your life.</p> <p>I will put hostility between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring. He will strike your head, and you will strike his heel.</p>	<p>REFLECT: Adam and Eve's rebellion against God wasn't simply the breaking of an arbitrary rule God had created, it was in effect a change of government, a change of rule. In eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of the good and evil, Adam and Eve were seeking to establish for themselves what is good and what is evil. They were seeking to be 'God'. This led to the disaster of God cursing the snake, themselves and the world in which they lived.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you considered what a curse is? • What happens if you are cursed? <p>Continued on the following page...</p>	

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Being cursed is a terrible situation to be in. In the modern sense of the word, to be cursed is to have a supernatural power that is punishing you. It is terrible because you are powerless to take it away. It is like a stain that can't be removed. It is like Murphy (from Murphy's law) always winning. It follows you where ever you go.

As human beings we are born into a world 'cursed' by God and nothing we do, in and of ourselves, can remove that curse. The Bible says that God's wrath is being revealed against all the ungodliness and unrighteousness of people who suppress the truth (Romans 1.18).

If you are cursed by God, the only place you can turn is to God to ask him to remove it. The Bible, while affirming God's curse, is really all about God's blessing to remove this curse. We'll come to that in our next meditation.

- To what extent do you see this world being under God's wrath? Where do you see this?

PRAY: Heavenly Father you tell me that I live in a world cursed by you. Your wrath at human rebellion is to be seen all around me. You have given people over to their own choices and we have made a terrible mess of your good creation. We are powerless without you to save ourselves. Thank you that your curse is not your last word, thank you that in Christ you remove the curse of sin and bring us into the blessing of forgiveness and new life. Amen

READ: Genesis 12:1-12

The Lord said to Abram:
Go from your land,
your relatives,
and your father's house
to the land that I will show you.

I will make you into a great nation,
I will bless you,
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you,
I will curse anyone who treats you with
contempt,
and all the peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.

REFLECT: In our last meditation we considered God's curse on humankind and on his creation. Yet you might remember that God's mission plan isn't cursing but blessing. A hint of God's mission plan is made in the curse on the serpent in chapter 3. When God says to the serpent, "*I will put hostility between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring. He will strike your head (Satan), and you will strike his heel.*" Christians have seen a reference to Jesus who would be 'hurt' by Satan, but who would eventually crush him and do away with evil.

This mission plan is elaborated later on in God's promise to one man Abram.

- What do you notice about the language of blessing (and cursing)?
- How does this relate to the cursing of chapter 3 of Genesis?

Chapter 12 of Genesis is a very important step in the revealing of God's mission plan for his world. God's promise to Abram comes against the backdrop of God's curse. If you read chapters 3 to 11 of Genesis you will see the spiral down into sin and evil that humanity takes.

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Against this depressing and black backdrop God promises through one man to bring blessing instead of a curse. This focuses the whole of God's mission through one family line, which would lead to the nation of Israel, which would lead to a remnant from that nation, which would lead to the Lord Jesus. The plan has been narrowed down, will expand out and then narrow down again, for it is only in Christ Jesus that the curse of sin is removed. Did you notice that this salvation plan is unconditional! It is not based on any human performance, goodness or law keeping, God simply says he will do it. This unconditional promise flows from God's character of love and mercy.

PRAY: Heavenly Father I thank you for your unconditional promise to bring blessing to those who don't deserve it. Thank you that in Christ you have reversed the curse of sin. Thank you that this flows from your character of unconditional love. Please help me to love others like this. Amen

READ: 2 Samuel 7:10-14, 15-16

"I will designate a place for my people Israel and plant them, so that they may live there and not be disturbed again. Evildoers will not continue to oppress them as they have done **11** ever since the day I ordered judges to be over my people Israel. I will give you rest from all your enemies. The Lord declares to you: The Lord himself will make a house (dynasty) for you. **12** When your time comes and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up after you your descendant, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. **13** He is the one who will build a house (dynasty) for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. **14** I will be his father, and he will be my son...my faithful love will never leave him as it did when I removed it from Saul, whom I removed from before you. **16** Your house (dynasty) and kingdom will endure before me forever, and your throne will be established forever."

REFLECT: In our last meditation we considered God's unconditional promise to bless people from all nations through Abram. This would be achieved by God creating a great nation. God fulfilled this and made the nation of Israel. He also made a covenant with them. This time the covenant (or promise) was conditional (unlike that made to Abram). Israel would be God's people if they kept his commands - which, if you know their history, they failed to do. However despite Israel's failure, God's unconditional promise to Abram still stood. His unconditional promise and plan to bring blessing to all nations is elaborated further in God's promise to David, king over Israel after Saul. Consider the verses from 2 Samuel.

- What does God promise David?
- How do you think this fits with God's missional purposes for his world?

Like chapter 12 of Genesis, this is also a very important step in the revealing of God's mission plan for his world. The reversing of the curse of Genesis 12 is now revealed to come about through a dynasty, through a kingly line related to David. God promises to establish a kingdom which is everlasting. This focuses the whole mission purposes of God on a king. This king's name will be great (*notice the allusion to Genesis 12.1-12*). Also the Davidic empire will set the ideal borders of the promised land (*God's place for his people*) and God will give David 'rest'. This rest is presumably greater than the provisional rest David already had (*notice the allusion to the goal of Exodus and the goal of creation which is rest.*)

PRAY: Heavenly Father your plan of salvation is elaborate and fulfilled in your timing. Thank you for the way you prepared us for the salvation which was to come in Jesus. Thank you that you give us rest in him, eternally.

READ: Mark 8.27-30

27 Jesus went out with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the road he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?"

28 They answered him, "John the Baptist; others, Elijah; still others, one of the prophets."

29 "But you," he asked them, "who do you say that I am?"

Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah (*the Christ, i.e. God's king*)."

30 And he strictly warned them to tell no one about him.

Galatians 3.7-14

7 You know, then, that those who have faith, these are Abraham's sons. 8 Now the Scripture saw in advance that God would justify the Gentiles by faith and proclaimed the gospel ahead of time to Abraham, saying, All the nations will be blessed through you. 9 Consequently, those who have faith are blessed with Abraham, who had faith. 10 For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, because it is written, Everyone who does not do everything written in the book of the law is cursed. 11 Now it is clear that no one is justified before God by the law, because the righteous will live by faith. 12 But the law is not based on faith; instead, the one who does these things will live by them. 13 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, because it is written, Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree. 14 The purpose was that the blessing of Abraham would come to the Gentiles by Christ Jesus, so that we could receive the promised Spirit through faith.

REFLECT: A king in the line of David is the key to God's promises to reverse the curse. This king is at the heart of God's missional purposes for the world. The disciples have been with Jesus for sometime and the moment is ripe for them to consider his identity so Jesus puts a question to them:

- What is that question?
- What answer does Peter give?

At the heart of God's missional saving purposes to reverse the curse is God's king, promised in the line of David. Peter, speaking on behalf of the disciples, finally cottons on to who Jesus really is. He is the great king of the eternal kingdom, promised to David in 2 Samuel 7.

Friends, this is a key element in being a missional Church. The fundamental question that our friends, colleagues, neighbours need to grapple with, in order to be saved from God's curse, is 'Who is Jesus!'. This is the starting point. Getting Jesus' identity right is crucial. This is what we want those who don't know Jesus to consider, all other matters in regards to the Christian life flow from this is.

Consider the second reading, it is about the curse of the law.

- How is someone blessed by God?
- What is that blessing?

As we have seen in our meditations on God's mission, humankind is under God's curse and trying to do God's law to remove the curse doesn't work. If you rely on your performance to do good, in obeying God's law, you are still under a curse. It is only and simply through trusting in Christ that we are blessed by God. Christ redeemed us (made us God's) by becoming a curse for us. That is he took the punishment we deserve so that we might receive the Holy Spirit. By this we have become God's children and are saved.

So if the first question our non-Christians friends need to grapple with is "Who is Jesus?" The second vital question is "What has he done for us?". Why not thank God for the blessing you have received by faith and pray for one person you know in Tamworth who doesn't yet know who Christ is and what he has done for them.

PRAY: Heavenly Father I thank you so much that Christ became a curse for me, so that I might receive your blessing which you promised unconditionally to Abram. Thank you that you have redeemed me and made me your child. Please work in the life of _____ (Put name of person) that he/she may believe in Jesus and be saved from the curse of your judgement. Amen

WEEK of 26th-30th April

Day 1	Membership matters for God's Church I
<p>READ: Ezekiel 37:21-22</p> <p>“This is what the Lord God says: I am going to take the Israelites out of the nations where they have gone. I will gather them from all around and bring them into their own land. I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel, and one king will rule over all of them. They will no longer be two nations and will no longer be divided into two kingdoms.”</p>	<p>REFLECT: In last week’s meditations, we saw that God saves us from the curse of his judgement as we trust in Jesus who became a curse for us. The Gospel brings us back to God and it also brings us together with others. The Gospel creates a common bond between all those who trust in what God has done for them in Jesus. The Gospel, then, is a message that ‘gathers’, brings people together. Consider the reading from Ezekiel:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does God promise to do for his divided people? • What is one of the key elements in them coming back together? <p>God gathered his people together after the Exodus at Mount Sinai for he is a gathering God. When he created humanity, male and female, it was not for two humanities, but for one, united in diversity. This reflects God’s character for he is one God who exists in eternity in three persons. When God’s people sinned against him and ignored his word it led to division and dispersion (The exile). Yet when God is at work in people’s hearts, it is not for division and dispersion, but for unity and harmony. This character of God as a gathering God sets the foundation for what it means to be part of God’s new humanity, the Church.</p> <p>PRAY: Heavenly Father, loving community and harmonious relationships is something we desire because you made us to be like you. I pray as I reflect this week on what it means to be a member of Christ’s body, the Church family, that you would help me to reflect your character. Amen</p>
Day 2	Membership matters for God's Church II
<p>READ: John 17:20-23</p> <p>“I pray not only for these, but also for those who believe in me through their word. May they all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us, so that the world may believe you sent me. I have given them the glory you have given me, so that they may be one as we are one. I am in them and you are in me, so that they may be made completely one, that the world may know you have sent me and have loved them as you have loved me.”</p>	<p>REFLECT: Before Jesus was about to suffer, he prayed to his heavenly Father for the 11 men (minus Judas Iscariot) who were his disciples. He prays that his Father would guard them in the world against the evil one and that he would sanctify them in the truth. Then Jesus prays for all those who would believe in him through them.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Looking at the verses on the left, what does Jesus ask for concerning those who would believe in him through the 11 eyewitness disciples? <p>Jesus’ desire is that those who believe in him, through the apostolic eyewitnesses, would be one. He asks that these Christians might be ‘in’ the Father and ‘in’ the Son, united. This only comes about through faith in the apostolic word and through the gift of the Spirit. The two are inseparable. The result of this is that the world will come to know who Jesus is, as the sent one from the Father and that God has loved them as he has loved his son.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What importance does Jesus place on the ministry of the 11 disciples for unity amongst God’s people? <p>PRAY: Heavenly Father, I thank you that through the word of the eyewitnesses you have chosen, you have united me to yourself and united me to all who believe in your name. Please help me to keep this bond of unity that you have created and help us in the Church to cling to your word by your Spirit. Amen</p>

Day 3	Membership matters for God's Church III
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READ: Acts 2:42-47

42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer.

43 Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and signs were being performed through the apostles. **44** Now all the believers were together and held all things in common. **45** They sold their possessions and property and distributed the proceeds to all, as any had need. **46** Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple, and broke bread from house to house. They ate their food with joyful and sincere hearts, **47** praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. Every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

REFLECT: God is a gathering God, who gathers his people and unites them through the apostolic word. In the book of Acts, Doctor Luke recounts the beginning of the very first Church. This is the beginning of the answer to Jesus' prayer in John 17 that you considered yesterday.

- What did the first community of believers devote themselves to?
- How did they treat each other?

The first Church (*at this stage made up solely of converted Jews*), devoted themselves to certain things. The word 'devoted' expresses a commitment to sticking with something, to cling to it with perseverance as being of great importance. This meant an attachment to the teaching of the apostles, to Christian community and to prayer (*the breaking of bread is most likely a reference to enjoying Christian fellowship together over a meal, a meal in which the Lord Jesus would have been remembered*).

This new 'Christian' community shared their resources with one another, caring for each other's needs. We mustn't think this is the beginning of a primitive form of communism, because later in the book of Acts we see Christians still owning property and being free to hold on to it or dispose of it as each individual or family saw fit. This is not a new imposed rule of common communal ownership in the Christian community, rather it is the work of the Spirit which moved Christians to be generous to each other.

PRAY: Heavenly Father, thank you for the work of your Holy Spirit that moved the first Christians to be devoted to you through your word, to prayer and to each other. Help us at St Peter's to be devoted to these things in our life together by the work of your Spirit. Amen

Day 4	Membership matters for God's Church IIII
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READ: Acts 11.19-26

Now those who had been scattered as a result of the persecution that started because of Stephen made their way as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. **20** But there were some of them, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, proclaiming the good news about the Lord Jesus. **21** The Lord's hand was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord. **22** News about them reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to travel as far as Antioch. **23** When he arrived and saw the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged all of them to remain true to the Lord with devoted hearts, **24** for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And large numbers of people were added to the Lord. **25** Then he went to Tarsus to search for Saul, **26** and when he found him he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught large numbers. The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch.

REFLECT: In our last meditation the very first Church (the new community of God) was made up of converted Jews. However this changed with the conversion of Cornelius and his family in chapter 10 of Acts. It also changed as God's church (*made up of converted Jews*) was persecuted and was scattered from Jerusalem. These Christian Jews started to share the good news of Jesus with non-Jews.

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- What do you see happening in the passage above?
- What were the Christians in Antioch called?

This is the very first time believers in the Lord Jesus were called Christians. This was because now, in God's plan, you had the first 'mixed' multi-cultural church. Before this, as Christians gathered, those communities were made up of converted Jews. However as Jews shared the good news of Jesus with non-Jews a new community was formed and its members needed a new name - 'Christians' - these were believers from Jewish and Gentile backgrounds. This was always God's plan and it is a marvellous thing. This shows us that God's gospel breaks down cultural divides and unites people from diverse backgrounds. As a result in Church life we see this happening and we should make every effort in what we say and do to keep the unity of the Spirit that God has given us. We ought to welcome those who may be 'different' to us and work at loving each other as members of God's family.

PRAY: Heavenly Father thank you that through the power of your word and the work of your Spirit you have created a new humanity made up of people from all backgrounds. Please help us as your people to reflect your good purposes by welcoming each other and loving each other as brothers and sisters in Christ regardless of what background we may come from. Amen

READ: Galatians 3.26-29

...for through faith you are all sons of God in Christ Jesus.

27 For those of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ. **28** There is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female; since you are all one in Christ Jesus. **29** And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, heirs according to the promise.

REFLECT: We have been thinking about what it means to be part of God's new humanity, members of his Church family.

- According to Paul, what are we through faith?
- How have we been 'clothed'?
- What is the result of this?

The members of the Galatian Church were being troubled by false teachers who said that the Gentile Christians had to obey the law of Moses to be legitimate 'sons of God' (*Children of God*). This is a complete denial of the Gospel of grace, for we become children of God and part of God's people simply through faith and faith alone. The result of this is that our standing in God's sight is based on this and this alone. This means that in God's church faith in Christ is the fundamental category - not other social statuses. As a result the big distinction that exists in the world today isn't between Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave or free, it is about whether people know Christ or not.

(We retained the 'sons' language in this verse because in Roman law a 'son' was a reference for 'legitimate child' - this is probably the meaning it carries and isn't a sexist reference relating to males only.)

PRAY: Heavenly Father thank you that basis of being part of your family isn't related to social status, gender or cultural background. Thank you that you have clothed me in Christ through faith. Help me to see my brothers and sisters in Christ as being members of our family that I might treat them like you do. Amen

Day 1

Maturity matters for God's church I

READ: Luke 2:41-52

41 Every year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover. **42** When he was twelve years old, they went up to the festival, according to the custom. **43** After the festival was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. **44** Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. **45** When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. **46** After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. **47** Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. **48** When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you." **49** "Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" **50** But they did not understand what he was saying to them. **51** Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. **52** And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man.

REFLECT:

Mission leads to membership. As God saves people through the Gospel being applied to their hearts the result of this is that people become children of God and members of his family. This is a family, made up of individuals, that God grows in maturity. Mission leads to membership which leads to maturity. This week we are going to think about growing in maturity as members of God's Church family. This is something that Jesus grew in, although he had no sin.

- In what ways can you see Jesus growing and wanting to grow in this passage?
- What was the result of his growth?

Christian maturity involves two main things: 1) growing in the knowledge of the Lord and 2) growing in Christ-likeness.

Jesus never had to grow in Christ-likeness for he was and is the Christ. When as Christians we use the phrase 'Christ-likeness', we most often mean growing in Christ like character. We are referring to our need to put off sin in our lives with the help of the Spirit and become more godly - trusting and obeying God like Jesus did. Jesus always trusted his heavenly father and obeyed him at every point. However Christian maturity isn't only about character, it is also about knowledge. Growing in our knowledge of God. This is not simply 'head' knowledge or 'academic' knowledge, it is a knowledge of God's character which ought to lead us to trust him and obey him.

Jesus as a boy spent time in the temple courts for he desired to grow in his knowledge of his heavenly Father and his father's will. He listened to the teachers, asked questions and grew in wisdom and stature. This is something God wants for you as well.

- Reflecting on the weeks and months gone by, how do you think God has grown you in knowledge of him and in Christ-like character?

PRAY: Thank you heavenly Father that you are the expert in growth. Thank you that you can help me to grow in knowledge of you which will lead me to trust and obey you. Please help me to grow that I might become more like your Son, the Lord Jesus. Help me to put off sin in my life and to obey you trusting that your will for my life is good. Amen

READ: Mark 4:13-20

13 Then Jesus said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?"

14 The farmer sows the word.

15 Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. **16** Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy.

17 But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.

18 Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; **19** but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful.

20 Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown."

REFLECT:

The Lord Jesus knew there would be growth in people from his ministry as the word of life, which he sowed, went out and found receptive hearts. He also knew there would be some people who would hear the word of life, but God's word would be unfruitful in their lives.

- What situations does Jesus envisage that stop people bearing fruit and growing?
- What area(s) do you think you are in most danger of?

Jesus knows that while his word, which can produce fruit, might be spread far and wide, only certain soils would produce fruit and lasting growth.

Jesus taught this to his disciples to help them have right expectations when it comes to sowing the seed of God's word. Although God's word is mighty to save, it doesn't always have this effect in everyone's life. Three of the four soils do not end up producing growth. It should not surprise us as Christians when God's word doesn't always change hearts, or when people seem to start well, then fall away.

However there is also an encouragement from these verses. God's word will produce fruit and an abundant harvest. This is also guaranteed! This helps us to persevere with making God's word known.

The other aspect of Jesus' teaching here is to get the disciples to think about their own lives so that they might ask God to make them the 'good' soil. There are situations and temptations from the world which can stop us producing the fruit that Jesus envisages. There are dangers we need to be aware of and we need God's help to overcome them.

PRAY: Thank you heavenly Father that as your word of life goes out it returns to you bearing fruit in the life of many. Help me to have this confidence that your word produces growth. Help me also Father to resist the temptation to turn away from you when persecution comes or to fall away when the riches and values of this world are enticing. Please help me to be the good soil where your word produces fruit and growth to your glory. Amen

READ: Colossians 1.3-8

3 We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, **4** because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God's people— **5** the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel **6** that has come to you. In the same way, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world—just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God's grace. **7** You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, **8** and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.

REFLECT:

In our previous meditation we considered how the 'word of life' or the word of the Lord Jesus would find differing receptions in the hearts of people. Some people would receive the word and turn away or be seduced by the world's values. However some people would be the good soil and God's word would produce growth in their lives. Paul, as he writes to the Christians in the greek city of Colossae, has heard of how the Gospel has found good soil.

- What does Paul thank his heavenly Father for?
- Since Paul gives thanks to God, what does this tell us about where the growth which he sees in these Christians has come from?
- How is the Spirit and the Gospel linked in this passage?

Paul is very encouraged to hear about these Christians in Colossae. They have heard the Gospel message through a man called Epaphras and they therefore have faith, love and hope. Faith - trust in God and the Lord Jesus, love - for God and for fellow Christians, hope - in the promise of God stored up in heaven. This faith, love and hope all spring from the Gospel and God's work in their lives through his Spirit.

Paul attributes this fruit and growth to the Gospel of the Lord Jesus as it is applied to their lives by the Holy Spirit. The Gospel is the message of grace, that is, it is the Gospel of God's generosity to sinners - his undeserved favour. It has a dynamic, life and power all of its own for it has surpassed Paul, the great preacher of the Gospel, and is growing throughout the world. This growth is both in the number of people who believe and also in the growth in maturity of these believers. The Gospel produces both types of growth.

As God's people we must cling to the Gospel of the Lord Jesus and continue to make it known. We must guard it, speak it to each other and bring others to hear it, for without the Gospel there is no growth in our lives or in God's Church family.

PRAY: Thank you heavenly Father for your powerful Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Thank you that through the Gospel you bring us to trust in you, you bring us to love you and others and you give us a hope that cannot be taken from us. Please help us to never take for granted the Gospel of your Son. Help us to grow in our understanding of the Gospel, help us to speak it to each other, help us to make it known to others. Amen

READ: Colossians 1.9-14

For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, **10** so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, **11** being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, **12** and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. **13** For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, **14** in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

REFLECT: In our previous meditation we saw how vital the Gospel of the Lord Jesus is for growth. The Gospel, which is a message from God concerning the Lord Jesus and what God has done and does for us in and through him, needs to be applied to our lives. This is why Paul prays. Notice what Paul asks for these growing Christians.

- What key things does Paul ask God to do in their lives?
- To what extent do you ask God to do this in your own life and the life of others?

Paul confident that God is at work in these people's lives asks God to help them to grow. This is one of those prayers which you can pray with great confidence. If God began a good work in them he will bring it to completion. This is one of the marvellous things about praying the things God wants for you - you can be sure he will help you progress in those areas!

Notice what Paul asks for, he asks that these Christians would know what God wants for them (his will). What is it that God wants? Firstly that they would bear the fruit of good works, secondly that they would grow in their knowledge of God (*this is different to knowing God's will, it is about knowing him, that is knowing his character*), thirdly that they might have perseverance to keep going in their Christian faith through the ups and downs and finally that in all this they would be thankful knowing what God has done for them.

- Which area do you think you need to grow in most?

PRAY: Thank you heavenly Father for the knowledge that if I pray according to your will you will answer my prayers in the affirmative. Please help me to grow to know your will better. Help me to produce the good fruit that brings glory to you, help me to persevere in the trials and tests that you give me and help me to be constantly thankful to you for all you have done for me.

I ask that you would help my brother _____ (put in name) and sister _____ (put in name) to grow in these things too, that they might likewise have joy in knowing you and in serving you to your glory. Amen

READ: Philippians 1:3-11

3 I thank my God every time I remember you. **4** In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy **5** because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, **6** being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

7 It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. **8** God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

9 And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, **10** so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, **11** filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.

REFLECT: If you asked a tradesman to do a job, you'd be happy that he started and made some progress, but how annoying would it be that near the completion of the job he kept taking other work and never really finished what he had started. God is not like a tradesman that doesn't finish the job. Notice what Paul says in the verses from Philippians:

- What is Paul confident of?
- When is God's work in them going to be completed?

Paul was confident that God had started a good work in the Philippian Christian's lives. The evidence of this work was their partnership in the gospel. They supported Paul's gospel ministry in prayer and financially and they also were making known the gospel in their part of the world.

Further evidence of God's good work in them was their love. As a result Paul asks that they might grow in their love and that their genuine love would grow in knowledge and depth of insight. It seems that Paul wanted their love to be directed to that which is best, that which brings glory to God and praise to his name. Part of growing as a Christian is about discerning amongst all the choices we have to make in life which ones are the best and most important. Not all the hard decisions in life are between right and wrong, some of the tricky decisions require wisdom, discerning what is good and what is better. Paul's great desire is that in the decisions the Philippians make in life they would lead to the fruit of righteousness and that they would be prepared for Christ's return.

- Which areas in life do you need to grow in your love and discernment of what is best?
- To what extent do you live life in the light of Christ's return?

PRAY: Thank you heavenly Father that you are a God who finishes what you start. I see this in the Old Testament promises. Whenever you made a promise you fulfilled that promise and brought about that which you said you would do. Please finish the good work you have started in me. Please help me to grow in love for you and for others. Please help me today to discern what is best to do for your name's sake. Amen

Day 1

Ministry matters for God's church I

READ: Exodus 19:3-8

Then Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain and said, "This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: **4** 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. **5** Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, **6** you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites."

7 So Moses went back and summoned the elders of the people and set before them all the words the Lord had commanded him to speak. **8** The people all responded together, "We will do everything the Lord has said." So Moses brought their answer back to the Lord.

REFLECT: We have been thinking about the purposes God has for us as his people - 'Church matters' in other words. We have seen that *Mission* leads to *Membership* which leads to *Maturity* which, as we see today, leads to *Ministry*. Ministry really is about serving. To minister is to serve. To serve God and serve others. Consider the passage for today where God has gathered his people after saving them from the hand of Pharaoh.

- What does God say his people will be (Verse 6)?
- What do you think it means that God's people were to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation?

The meaning of the words 'kingdom of priests and a holy nation' has been debated by Christians throughout the centuries. The 'holy nation' part isn't the bit that causes debate, it is the reference to them being a kingdom of priests.

Some people have suggested that the reference to Israel being a kingdom of priests relates to their outreach purpose in the world. They were to act as 'go betweens'. In other words they were to bring people from other nations to know God through their 'priestly function' in going out and witnessing to the world. While this is true of disciples under the New Covenant, in the Old Covenant Israel's priestly function wasn't so much a question of going out but a matter of being. They were to be different and in this way they were to serve God and serve the nations. Israel failed to be different to the other nations because of their sin, but it reveals to us that serving God and others is at the heart of God's purposes for his people. We will think more about serving God and others this week in our meditations.

- To what extent do you see yourself as a servant of God and others?
- In what ways do you serve God and others?

PRAY: Thank you heavenly Father that you have a purpose for me in the world and that is to serve you and to serve others. Because of my sin, I am naturally self serving. This is not what you are like, please help me by your Spirit to serve you and serve others for I believe in being who you have made me to be there is great freedom. Amen

Day 2

Ministry matters for God's church II

READ: Luke 12:35-40

35 "Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning,
36 like servants waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him. **37** It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. Truly I tell you, he will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them. **38** It will be good for those servants whose master finds them ready, even if he comes in the middle of the night or toward daybreak. **39** But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. **40** You also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him."

REFLECT: To serve is to do useful work for someone, to perform duties or to help for the sake of others. To serve doesn't mean you have to be subordinate to others, in leadership you can serve and perform duties for the sake of others.

- What types of service do you see from our passage today?
- Who is serving?
- What is Jesus seeking to teach his disciples?

Jesus' teaching here is clear. As his servants we are to be on about his business while we await his return. We will unpack what it might mean to serve our Lord in the here and now in the days to come. I want you however to notice something surprising that is easy to miss in this passage. Did you notice what the master will do when he returns to servants who are ready for him? The master himself will have the servants recline at the table and the master will serve them (notice verse 37). That is surprising and unexpected!

This shows us that Jesus who is Lord over all is also the servant of his servants. He serves us. This shows us that it is part of God's character to serve and likewise for us to be like Jesus means we are to have servant hearts that want to serve others.

- In what ways are you serving your brothers and sisters in Christ?

PRAY: Thank you heavenly Father that you are a God who serves. I see this in Jesus who gave up his life for us that we might live. Help me to be one who serves my brothers and sisters in Christ. Help me to use the resources and gifts you have given me for the sake of your name. Amen

Day 3

Ministry matters for God's church III

READ: Mark 10:42-45

42 Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. **43** Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, **44** and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. **45** For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

REFLECT: I heard someone who was aspiring to leadership one day saying, "I'm not silly, I'm in leadership to get other people to do the jobs I don't want to do!" It struck me that this person needed to learn from Jesus!.

- How are Jesus' disciples to think about leadership?
- What example does Jesus give them?

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Leadership in the modern day is not so different from leadership in Jesus' day. This is because people's hearts are still the same. People in leadership can often 'lord' it over others, treat them harshly and unfairly while doing nothing to serve those under them. Christian leadership is quite different. The christian boss or leader will be prepared to do the dirty work, prepared to go the extra mile for those under him, will sacrificially give up his/her holiday preferences for those of his employees and more. This is a radically different way of serving.

- How are you seeking to live out Jesus' servant heart towards those around you?

PRAY: Heavenly Father thank you for the Lord Jesus who served me by becoming a ransom in my place. I realise he has set the pattern of servant leadership and I ask you would help me to reflect him in the way I treat others. Amen

READ: Luke 16:13

No servant can **serve** two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot **serve** God and money."

REFLECT: To be a disciple of the Lord is to serve him, just as he serves us. However there are other things in our lives we can end up serving over and above our Lord.

- What danger does Jesus outline in our serving in these verses?
- How might you know that you have fallen into the danger of serving money?

A master is someone who dictates what you are to do. You obey his demands and requirements. To serve money then is to be ruled by it. Money rules you when you spend the majority of your time trying to acquire more, it rules you when the bottom line is the most important line, it rules you when you are incapable of being generous.

Our Lord should have the number one allegiance in our lives for after all any of the riches we have come from him.

- When was the last time you asked the Lord what he wants you to do with the money you have?

PRAY: Heavenly Father how easy it is to be ruled by money and think that happiness, power and influence come from having more of it. Please help me to see what I have as coming from you. Please help me to serve you in being generous with what you have given me. Help me to be ruled by you and not by money. Amen

READ: 1 Peter 4:7-10

The end of all things is near. Therefore be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray. **8** Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. **9** Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.

10 Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. **11** If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever.

REFLECT: It is easy to grumble when we serve. We can feel resentful when we are left with all the work to do and few people pitch in to help.

- What does Peter say we should do in these verses?
- Why do you think God has given you certain gifts?

The encouraging thing about these verses is that God has given you at least one gift and most probably more for the sake of others. You are to be a faithful steward of that gift using it for the sake of others and for his glory. Serving can sometimes be a thankless task, it can take effort and perseverance. Peter says we should serve, not in a begrudging manner as this doesn't please God, rather we should ask for his help to do it in a way that honours him.

- What gifts do you think the Lord has given you? How are you using these gifts to serve God and serve your brothers and sister in Christ?
- What is your attitude at the moment to serving? Do you need the Lord's help to strengthen you in his service?

PRAY: Heavenly Father thank you that in your manifold wisdom you have given different gifts to your people. You have gifted me for the sake of others. In my sinful human nature it is so easy for me to grumble and complain and sometimes find it hard to serve. Please help me by your Spirit to serve with a full heart and with joy that you might be honoured in the way I spend my time and use the gifts you have given. Amen