



# Glory in the Garden

31 Days of Devotionals  
bringing us closer to the Father through  
the beauty of his creation

Jill McSheehy

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To my mom, Judy Gray, who modeled a love of gardening (even when I wanted nothing to do with it) but most importantly modeled love and selfless service to Jesus Christ. Thank you for believing in me.

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# Preface

Although I had been exposed to gardening most of my life, I never took an interest until just a few years ago. My first year, my garden was 2,500 square feet—quite large for a beginner. I had successes and failures, and the learning curve was quite steep.

From an output standpoint, I'd say my first garden was quite successful. But I reaped more than I ever dreamed I would—my eyes were opened. I saw first-hand the reason why so many spiritual truths revealed in Scripture centered around the garden. Parables came to life. I saw the basics of the Gospel woven into the fabric of creation itself.

I was awestruck.

My gardening adventure was more than a hobby. It became a way for God to show himself to me in the most beautiful and intricate parts of his creation.

This devotional book comes from the viewpoint of a novice gardener, one with new eyes. My hope is that whether you have been gardening for decades or don't garden at all, you can see through my eyes into the beauty God's creation beholds—if we only look.

***“From the creation of the world His invisible attributes, that is, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what He has made. As a result, people are without excuse” (Romans 1:20 HCSB).***

# Acknowledgements

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# Introduction

This is a devotional book, to be read as only my thoughts on nature—the garden specifically—in the context of Scripture. Each day has a short passage to read, followed by a focal verse. To receive the full context of each devotional, it is important to read these verses, as many of the devotionals were written with the context of the Scripture passages in mind.



# Firstfruits

Read: 1 Corinthians 15:20-23

Focal verse: 1 Corinthians 15:20

I hold the red promise of deliciousness in my hand. A gentle breeze nips at my skin as the sunlight offers the warmth of spring.

The beautiful white flowers came first, while the wind still had a bite. Then came the green fruit, alive with promise of this day.

Finally, I pinch the green leaves between my thumbs and take that first long anticipated bite of fresh strawberry. My mouth can barely contain the warm juice. Sweetness touches every taste bud. I close my eyes and savor this moment as long as I can.

**The firstfruit.** As the days pass, I can barely beat my kids to the strawberry patch. But when I do, none of these spring berries compare to that first exquisite bite.

What is so special about the firstfruit?

**The real thing.** After a long, cold, drab winter of eating tart impostors that traveled farther to get to my house than I've traveled in my lifetime, I get to taste the real thing. No longer do I have to eat the semblance of how this fruit was meant to be. I can taste the real thing.

**And promise.** With the plucking of this berry, I am promised more that are ripening behind it. And not only strawberries but peas, tomatoes, squash, beans, okra, and watermelon. The harvest season is coming!

“But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep... But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ,” (1 Cor. 15:20, 23 ESV).

The Real Firstfruit. Jesus Christ was the firstfruit after a long winter that began at the Fall (pardon the pun). Prophets, preincarnate appearances of Christ, and Old Testament allegories were a semblance of the perfect Firstfruit to come.

And promise. Just as Christ was raised from the dead, so will we be who are in Christ. Because of his resurrection, we can trust that the harvest is coming! Our bodies will be raised imperishable! Let that sink in.

There's hope in Christ, the firstfruit.

There's joy in Christ, the firstfruit.

There's promise for YOU in the firstfruit.

***Think about Christ being the true firstfruit. What encouragement does this give you for what is to come?***

## Reaping the Unsown

Read: Matthew 25:14-30

Focal Verse: Matthew 25:24

Fourteen baby cantaloupes. That's how many I counted in my 8' x 4' raised bed. You'd think I'd be thrilled at the productivity of these couple of cantaloupe vines. The only problem? I didn't plant them. Having spent all winter carefully planning each raised bed and square foot of garden space, this particular raised bed was earmarked for tomatoes and peppers. I had no idea if these foreign cantaloupes would help or hurt my Better Boys and Costa Rican Reds.

But I couldn't convince myself to pull the vines either. They were growing so well—better, in fact, than the cantaloupes I carefully and intentionally planted in hills not far away.

**Unexpected.** I couldn't shake my confusion with the whole situation. Being only my second gardening year, I wasn't aware that this is actually pretty common. These unplanned plants are called “volunteers.” Apparently, seed from last year's cantaloupes had blown into that bed and taken root. Now I found myself excitedly waiting for these fourteen-plus cantaloupes to ripen. I'm the only one in our family who likes them, so what was I going to do with all those cantaloupes anyway?

As I stared at this strange sight, a verse came to my mind that I never understood. It's located in the Parable of the Talents:

“...’You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sowed and gather where I scattered no seed?’” (Matthew 25:26 ESV)

**Confusion.** The “Master” speaking in this verse represents God. That always puzzled me. Why in the world would God expect to reap where he had never sown? It made no sense to me. And cantaloupes ripening where I had not planted them made no sense to me as a beginning gardener. I could only watch and scratch my head.

But, now, gazing at my fourteen cantaloupes, it made perfect sense.

**Understanding.** Those cantaloupes were the products of last year’s diligent sowing. I didn’t get many cantaloupes last year, though—maybe two or three. Rabbits ate almost all of my cantaloupe plants, and I was disappointed that my time and effort of preparing for an enormous cantaloupe harvest came to very little.

But this year! I had no idea what I was going to do with at least fourteen cantaloupes, in addition to the ones I actually planted!

**Perfect timing.** I had to laugh at God’s way of showing me this truth. What we sow at any given time may not produce the bounty we expect at the time we expect it, but when the time is right, God causes fruit to grow. It may not come in the season in which it was sown. In fact, we may never see the fruit ripening on the vine. If, for instance, we’d move away this year, I’d never see the sweet result of last year’s hard work.

Our job is to prepare the land, sow in the right season, care for what we sow, and leave the results to God. He may, in fact, bring a great harvest at a time we least expect it.

The servant in Matthew 25:24 called the Master a “hard man,” but while the Master repeated the servant’s other descriptions of himself, he never agreed that he was a hard master. At first glance, expecting to reap where no seed was sown and gather where no seed was scattered seems harsh. But after watching this beautiful picture in nature, I realize this is actually an amazing characteristic of God. We never know how and when God will bring bounty from our faithfulness, even when our faithfulness at first glance seems to be for nothing.

*Are you in a season of discouragement where you see no fruit of your labor? Keep preparing the land. Keep sowing. Keep caring for what you sow. And leave the reaping to the Master Gardener.*

## Seize the Season

Read: 1 Peter 1:24-25

Focal verse: Psalm 90:12

Toward the end of September, after my first full season of gardening, the exhaustion was palpable. I was ready for the work to end. I could tell the plants were “ready” as well. They had produced an abundant harvest, endured extreme heat, and survived pests. All I wanted to do was clean up what remained of the plants, hibernate inside my house, and cuddle in front of the fire.

**Life cycle.** Isn't that how we picture life? We'll work hard for seven or eight decades and then we'll naturally begin to tire as our end nears. We'll reflect on our endurance during the rough times and rejoice in the fruit of our labor. Ultimately, when our bodies wear out, we'll be ready to rest in the arms of Christ.

**Interrupted.** But it doesn't always work out like that, does it? Some of my plants died while they were still young. Some produced prolifically for a while before succumbing to a fatal pest. Some were wiped out in an evening by hungry wildlife. Though I've never experienced it, I've heard of blight taking an entire tomato crop at its peak.

Such is life. We all expect to complete the entire season, but only some will. Some meet their heartbreaking end before any fruit was ever produced, before they ever got the chance. Some contract a terminal disease at their peak. Others are taken in a night by an unpredictable outside force.

**Acceptance.** How do we make sense of this? How can we remain content with whatever peace the Lord gives and the Lord takes away? (Job 1:21) How do we comprehend the reason some live their entire season and others meet an untimely end? Is there, in fact, any such thing as an untimely death in a world ruled by a sovereign God?

I've had to come to the conclusion that there are simply some things I won't know until I am in Heaven with Jesus and see the big picture. In the meantime, I can take heart the wisdom from

today's verse: "So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom," (Psalm 90:12 ESV).

**Number my days.** How can I "number" my days when I don't know how many I have? I can number this one. Today. And I can prayerfully commit each day to being as productive in the mission of God as I can be. Today.

**Stuck in someday.** Because I'm not promised tomorrow, some lines of thinking simply have to be discarded. I'll do more for God once I graduate, or once I am married, or once my children are older, or once I have more financial resources. Sometimes we can get stuck in the "somedays." Someday I can do this or that. There always seems to be a hurdle we feel we must cross before we can be effective.

The problem with someday living is we aren't promised someday. There's no harm in planning for future missions or ministry. But there is harm in doing nothing until the timing is just right in our opinions.

Seize the season. Whatever season in life we find ourselves, there is opportunity to be on mission with Christ, whether that's in our school, our workplace, our church, our everyday comings and goings, or our home. Even if we think we don't know enough about the Bible, or we don't have all the tools we need to carry on a conversation with an unbeliever, or we can't be used for some reason, God can and will use a willing heart, one who knows that the only day we can wisely number is today.

*At the beginning of each day, lay out the plan of your day to God. Pray over each item on your schedule. Ask God to show you where you can bring his kingdom to those around you. Ask him to help you be flexible and open to divine interruptions. Look for ways you can love those he brings upon your path.*

# Death to Life

Read: Galatians 2:20, 5:24

Focal Verse: Galatians 5:24

When I began my gardening adventure, my husband built me a compost tumbler. We knew that compost is coined “black gold” for a reason, and wanted to make use of our kitchen scraps, grass clippings, and chicken manure.

I haven’t quite figured out how to compost perfectly, but I do know that a garden with compost is a more productive garden. It makes the existing soil healthier, and it ultimately promotes more beautiful plants and a more bountiful crop.

What goes into compost exactly? Essentially, that which was once alive. Kitchen scraps from produce, coffee grounds that were once the beans from a coffee plant, and grass clippings that were once the growing lawn are common ingredients.

The truth we see in composting is this: the more dead stuff you put in your garden, the healthier the soil will become.

In today’s verses in Galatians, we can visualize a significant spiritual parallel. When Paul says he was “crucified with Christ,” he means that his old self “died.” He describes the dead self as being composed of fleshly passions and desires.

**A daily process.** Jesus says in Luke 9:23, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me,” (ESV). Paul wasn’t implying that his self was crucified once and for all. (See Romans 7:15-25.) Instead he knew that this was an ongoing process. Jesus says it is a daily process.

Just as I daily take my kitchen scraps to the compost bin to eventually provide a more fertile soil, we must daily take up our cross and crucify our own fleshly passions and desires. The more we do this, the more those dead parts of us will turn us into fertile ground for the word to produce a harvest in our lives.

Right here in the laws of nature, God shows us this critical truth.

**Artificial supplements.** Just as chemical fertilizers are the norm in our agriculture practices, we may try to supplement our soil artificially in a myriad of ways. We may seek a reputable self-help book. We may pour our minds into the latest evangelistic method. We may add programs to our ministries hoping to see growth through the attraction of the program alone. The list could go on.

**Death and growth.** But the truth we see in nature is that the death of our sins, our passions, and our desires is the means for producing the richest soil, making us ripe for growth. God doesn't just leave the dead things in the world for trash. Just as he repurposes it in nature, he will repurpose the dead stuff in us as well.

*What stuff in your life needs to be crucified? Some of these passions and desires may need to be crucified daily. Can you think of ways God may use the dead stuff in your life to create prolific growth in your soul?*



# Spring is Coming

Read: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14

Focal verse: 1 Thessalonians 4:13

I don't recall a season in my thirty-plus years when I did not look forward to fall. The cooler weather, the beautiful display of color-checked mountains, the anticipation of holiday get-togethers, cuddling under blankets, and hot coffee by the fire. Ahh!

**Signs of the season.** This year is different. My second full garden season ushered in unexpected emotions with the yellowing of the trees and the coat of bronze pine needles in the yard. As I observe these pictures of the beauty of the season, all I see is one thing: impending death.

It sounds dramatic, I know. But for the first time in my life I really took in the drab of winter last year. Bare trees, brown lawn, and the few signs of life. I looked at my dreary backyard, bordered with wilted pine trees from the recurring ice storms and longed for signs of life.

**A hopeful view.** I shared this with my mom one day, and I should not have been surprised at the wisdom she immediately uttered.

“The dead of winter is what makes spring so beautiful.”

It's no wonder her favorite flower is the jonquil. Along with the Bradford pear trees, the slender green leaves poking through the mulch last winter brought my heart such joy. New life is coming! Spring is on its way!

**Spring is coming.** I suppose I should look at winter for what it is—a reminder that no matter how dead the world around us seems, for believers in Christ, spring is always on its way.

A marriage seems hopeless, but out of nowhere a sign of life appears. Spring is coming.

Long unemployment tests our faith, but soon a break comes. Spring is coming.

Terminal illness threatens to cripple spirit as well as body, but peace emerges. Whether in this

life or the next, spring is coming.

A prodigal child is away from home, but a knock on the door happens when you least expect it. Spring is coming.

**When winter delays.** It may be a long, hard, dreary winter. The sun may not shine for days or weeks. The end doesn't seem to be anywhere in sight. But when our hope is in Christ, we can rest in the hope that never fails. In an answer to the when and how that only he knows,

Spring is coming.

*Are you enduring a winter in your life? What do the seasons show you about what God has planned for your future?*

# Don't Grow Weary

Read: Galatians 6:9-10

Focal Verses: Galatians 6:10

The tiller and I were in an arm-wrestling match and I was losing. Its tines hardly penetrated the yellowing grass. Not in the best shape anyway, I could feel my energy draining away and knew I wouldn't be able to finish the job.

From his nearby perch upon his riding mower, my husband saw my struggle. He signed to me, asking if I wanted to switch. With a desperate look of relief I nodded as he chuckled at me.

After he finished tilling the ground of our new garden expansion, he instructed me to rake the vegetation. I thought that would be easy enough. Boy, was I wrong. After three wheelbarrows full of grass taken to the compost heap, I was asking my daughter to get me some Gatorade.

Gardening is hard work. Much harder than I ever anticipated. Sometimes, while preparing the soil or pulling weeds, I wonder if it's worth it.

And then, in due season, I realize that it is. It's all worth it.

When my children happily pick buckets full of green beans, it's worth it.

When we dig for potatoes like we're digging for gold, it's worth it.

When the only item on our dinner plate that didn't come from the garden is the meat, it's worth it.

When my grocery bill during harvest season is a fraction of what it normally is, it's worth it.

When I open a jar of home canned black-eyed peas in the middle of winter, it's worth it.

Sometimes, as we labor in the works of love, sharing the gospel, prayer and serving, it is easy to grow weary—especially when the seasons aren't nice and predictable like that of a garden season. A season of laboring in prayer for a lost loved one can go on for years. Sometimes we

plant dozens of seeds in dozens of lives and only see a handful sprout.

Don't become weary of doing good. In due season we will reap. We may reap in this life, but we may, like Abraham, never see the fruits of our labor until eternity. Still, the promise is there.

Look at it again: in due season we will reap (Gal. 6:9).

***Are you growing weary in doing good for the sake of the gospel? Don't give up. Claim the promise that's there. If you don't give up, in due season, you will reap. And it will be a harvest worth celebrating.***

# To Weed or Not to Weed—That is the Question

Read: Luke 7:31-35

Focal Verse: Luke 7:35

When I was growing up, my mom always had a garden. For some reason I didn't choose to participate and I don't recall much about it except the scent of tomato plants and the awful smell of tomatoes being canned. (I loathe tomatoes.) I am sure Mom planted seeds along with transplants, but I certainly wasn't involved.

As I began my own garden, eventually I graduated from using only transplants to planting seeds. That's when I noticed a problem. I didn't know the difference between a seedling and an emerging weed. With time, I learned to recognize the heart-shaped brassica, the long, thin carrot, the bowtie cucurbit, or the dainty lettuce seedlings, but at the beginning I was lost.

Until I learned the difference, I let both grow and soon it became clear which ones were weeds that needed pulling.

Sometimes when we're observing the world around us, it's unclear whether we're looking at a potential fruitful plant or a troublesome weed.

**Beginner's eyes.** This is most evident in a Christian who is either new to the faith or still unfamiliar with the Word of God that leads to wisdom. Just as my beginning gardener eyes couldn't distinguish between good and bad, so also the untrained spiritual eyes struggle. The temptation is to assume if something is green, it must be good.

**Trained eyes but blind.** But this problem also plagues the astute, practiced spiritual eyes. It was the Pharisees—schooled in the most rigorous of Scripture study—who accused Jesus of being a glutton and a drunkard by observing the company he kept. Wouldn't many of us assume the same things? We believe our discerning eyes are so practiced that we can glance at a situation

and believe we know the answer. But as the Pharisees showed us, not all is as it appears. If they had looked closer and observed what was going on beneath the surface, they would have seen the fruitfulness of physical and spiritual healing and lives being restored from brokenness.

Ultimately, whether with beginner or trained eyes, we will determine whether a school of thought, a church program, a ministry, a lifestyle, or a proclaimed redeemed life bears true spiritual fruit. Wisdom is truly known by her children. Sometimes it takes simply waiting and watching closely before we can know for sure whether we're looking at a weed or a fruitful plant.

*Are you a beginner Christian? Make a point to get in the Word regularly. Just as I'd never be able to recognize my seedlings without time in the garden, you're open to being deceived by the world's counterfeits if you're not in the Word.*

*Do you see yourself as having trained spiritual eyes? Watch out that you don't make a hasty or careless judgment based on your experience or personal inclinations—without studying the plant or the evidence of fruit. If you're not careful, you might just pull up what has potential to produce more than you could imagine. Stay in the Word. Trained eyes can be deceived as easily as untrained ones if we focus on the wrong things.*

## What We Sow

Read: Galatians 5:16-23

Focal Verses: Galatians 6:7

Sowing and reaping is a pretty straightforward concept for me and my garden. If I sow a basil seed, I'll get a basil plant the same season. If I sow a cucumber seed, I'll get a cucumber vine within a few weeks. I also know that if I sow nothing, I will reap nothing.

As we know, the same is true in our lives. If we sow the seed of the word of God in our hearts, we'll reap the fruit of that word, such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. If we sow the seed of indulging our flesh, then we'll reap the fruit of our sinful nature.

This is easy to grasp with our heads but sometimes a little difficult to apply to our lives. Do we truly realize what we're sowing in our hearts in the daily decisions we make?

Let's consider some examples. What seeds are planted in our hearts by the TV shows and movies we watch? Seeds promoting holiness? Or seeds that make us lax on the sins listed in Galatians 5:19-21? Look at that list again and take mental note how many of those sins are accepted or even celebrated in what you watch.

What about social media? I know at one time I was so inundated with fear-inducing articles that I had to purposefully limit my social media time or choose not to click on those articles. Please, don't get me wrong—I believe we should be up to speed on what's going on in the world, but in my case, I could sense the seeds of fear being planted in my heart, which were the opposite of the peace the Spirit provides, even in the midst of frightening circumstances.

How much time do we devote to filling our minds with that which glorifies God and points us to him? I urge you to spend time with him, and in his word daily, even if it's just a few minutes. Let me challenge you to fill your mind during other times, as well. Listen to Bible-teaching podcasts while you're doing the mundane tasks of the day. Turn your radio to Christian music as

you're in your car.

Have you seen a basil seed? It's quite tiny. But once planted it grows into a huge fragrant herb. Likewise, the "small" seeds we allow in our hearts have the potential to grow far more than we expect. So take care.

***What practical steps can you make today to reduce the "bad" seeds and instead plant seeds in your heart and mind that bring you closer to Christ?***



## Different Plants, Different Needs

Read: Ephesians 4:29-32

Focal Verse: Ephesians 4:29

As I walk past my four blueberry bushes, I can't help but admire the explosion of lush growth from this past year. Branches are taller, leaves are more abundant, and small berries entice with a promise of blueberry muffins, pies, and jam.

**Different plants, different needs.** Before I bought these bushes, I thoroughly researched how to grow blueberries. The one key to successful blueberries is the acidity of the soil: it must have a pH of around 5.0. The last soil test I did showed that my soil hovered in that range, but I still made every effort to follow proper blueberry-bed soil-building. We tilled deeply, adding plenty of pine needles and wood chips into the new bed.

Conversely, for another garden (whose vegetables would not tolerate acid soil), I meticulously scattered lime in the fall. That winter, I added ash from the fireplace. Thus far, those vegetables are responding well to the soil amendments, as are the blueberries.

**Different people, different needs.** Just as God made plants diverse and with a variety of individual needs, he made people that way, too. We all have different personalities, learning styles, and life experiences that make personal ministry one tough task. A one-size-fits-all approach will rarely fit all.

Of course, the Gospel is for all. Just as each plant needs nutrients, light, and water, we all need the saving grace of Jesus Christ. But just as each plant needs a specific environment to successfully take in the nutrients it needs, people thrive in different environments as well.

I can't use the same discipline methods on my son as I do my daughter. I can't teach with the same style in my class and expect to reach all my students; my teaching style must vary—many times in the same session. My friends have different needs—one needs long, deep conversations to work through an issue. Another simply needs to hang out and chat. Still others

get by with a mere hug.

**The example of Jesus.** Jesus provides the perfect example of adapting his methods to meet the needs of individuals. He spoke healing to one; he touched another. He rebuked one disciple; he redirected another. He spoke truth to one teacher of the law in front of his peers; another he taught privately. He told one to leave his hometown; he told another to return to it.

Just as I studied what my blueberry bushes and other plants needed, we would be wise to study those around us: our spouse, our children, our leaders, our mentees, and our friends. Only when we understand what makes an individual tick can we truly “build up one another according to their needs.” (Ephesians 4:29 NIV)

*Who do you need to study more closely so you can minister more effectively? Sometimes we tend to minister in the way we would want to be ministered to, but a wise and loving friend (or parent or spouse) will seek to minister in the way that will benefit that individual and his/her needs in particular.*

# Growth Habits

Read: Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Focal Verse: Ecclesiastes 4:12

My first year growing peas was quite interesting. After doing my research, I expected them to be the cool-weather version of the beans that were so successful the previous year. I planted them, provided string for them to climb, and waited for them to grow tiny tendrils that could grasp the string.

But alas, my poor little peas weren't near as stealthy as my beans. In hindsight, the first string was too high. The tender plants began to put out feelers when they were much smaller than the first string. In watching these delicate plants stretch for the string, I discovered three growth habits:

1. Some would grow until they finally reached the string.
2. Some would wrap their feelers around the next plant.
3. Some would both reach for the first string while holding onto the next plant simultaneously.

What I found was that the first group was healthy but not as prolific. The second group put all their energy into supporting one another and it took them much longer to reach the first string. The third group was the most successful. They reached the first string while relying on support of the others.

Don't we have similar tendencies?

1. Some of us pursue God by ourselves. We don't need anyone to help. We're single-minded and have a close walk with God but we lack support "on the ground" and get lonely at times.
2. Some of us give up pursuing God because it seems he's way too far out of reach. Instead

we expend our energy gaining strength and support from those around us. We think this type of living is fulfilling, but we know, deep in our soul, that we're missing our life's purpose.

3. Some of us understand that our growth toward God is of primary importance, but having and giving support to those growing with us makes for a much more enjoyable and less burdensome journey.

***Which growth habit describes you? If you tend to pursue God alone, recognize that you need others. Make a concerted effort to build relationships with those pursuing him, too. If you tend to reach for support from those around you before reaching for God, make a decision to talk to God before talking to anyone else. Allow him to be your primary objective, and you'll find yourself with much healthier relationships with those who are pursuing him as well.***

## The Seed Sown on the Path

Read: Mark 4:1-20

Focal Verses: Mark 4:3-4, 14-15

In my garden, I have established paths where I walk between rows of vegetables. I try to stay on those walkways because walking too close to the growing plants compacts the soil, inhibiting their optimal growth. The mulch along these paths is uniform. The ground is hard. The rain doesn't puddle. Those areas are not ideal for sowing seeds because seeds will not take root on hard ground.

**Comparing soils.** The first three soils described in the "Parable of the Soils" is often bypassed too quickly. Who wants to talk about the seed on the path (or on the rocks, or choked by thorns) when you can talk about the seed that falls on good ground? Yet much wisdom abides in those first three soils.

"Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it ... The sower sows the word. And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them," (Mark 4:3-4, 14-15 ESV).

**Preparing the soil.** The seed is the word: the truth of the Gospel. The soil is the heart of the person receiving the word. This first soil shows us that some hearts are like the paths in my garden. They have been trampled upon over and over—by other people, by circumstances, perhaps even by the Church—and have become hardened. To protect themselves from hurt, their hearts have compacted where there is simply no room for the seed of the Gospel to take root.

We, as those who are commissioned with sowing the seed, must take the wisdom of this parable to heart. We can sow the good news every day, but if we pay no attention to the condition of the soil of a person's heart, the truth rarely penetrates. We throw out the good news with little results.

**Caring for the soil.** Instead, prayerfully discerning the heart condition of a person before haphazardly throwing the truth to them will give us wisdom, enabling us to know when the heart is ready for the word. If we see that the person's heart has been hardened due to constant trampling, we proceed with care. Only after working with a person to help them scrape off that hard protective barrier and loosen some of that soil will the word ever have an opportunity to penetrate and take root.

*Who in your life do you want to share the truth of Jesus with but the soil of his or her heart is too hard? What can you do to help loosen that soil?*

*Or, could your heart be the soil on the path? Have you been trampled upon and hurt so much you can't seem to let the truth of Jesus in? What steps could you take to allow the soil of your heart to be softened?*

# The Seed Sown on Rocky Ground

Read: Mark 4:1-20

Focal Verses: Mark 4:5-6, 16-17

One of the biggest nemeses in my garden last year was weeds. Though I had a hard time keeping up with them, I learned a valuation lesson. Where I had placed mulch on top of the soil, I made quick work of the tedious weed-pulling task. In the places without mulch, I'm sure I was a back injury waiting to happen.

Why were the weeds in the mulch so easy to pull? Simple. Their roots weren't deep and established. They looked like every other weed in my garden, but with the slightest tug they were gone.

“Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away ... And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away,” (Mark 4:5-6, 16-17 ESV).

**The rocky soil.** Jesus tells us that the rocky soil represents those who take the word at surface level but never allow it to penetrate deep into the heart. As believers, sometimes I think we place so much emphasis on conversion (the acceptance of the word) that we don't heed Jesus' warning here that unless the plant develops deep roots, it will wither and die.

When I get ready to plant in the spring, I pull back all the mulch that has protected the soil over the winter. For the plant to develop deep enough roots to grow and withstand our brutal Arkansas summers, the seed or plant must be planted in the soil, not the mulch.

**Taking off the rocks.** Similarly, when we share Jesus with someone, we must get close enough to help them pull back that mulch—or those rocks—so we can plant that word of truth in ready

soil. Sometimes that means withholding the word until those rocks are gone and the soil of their hearts is ready to receive it. If we haphazardly plant the word without stopping to remove the rocks, no root will develop, even if faith initially appears to spring up quickly.

**Rocks of protection.** Keep in mind, many times those rocks are there for protection, just like my mulch. We all protect ourselves to some extent. In order to help someone remove those rocks, we need to be willing to get close to them. They will only feel comfortable being vulnerable with us when we have taken the effort to lovingly enter their lives.

*Who in your life might have rocks of protection, preventing a deep root of faith from developing? How can you help that person remove those rocks?*

*Or, do you find that your faith has little root and you fear falling away if intense persecution or tribulation comes? What steps can you take to grow your roots? It might mean throwing out some of those rocks of protection and trusting your growth to your Savior.*



# The Seed Sown Among the Thorns

Read: Mark 4:1-20

Focal Verses: Mark 4:7, 18-19

Here in the South, we love us some fried okra. Okra is a staple in most southern gardens, and it is one of the easiest vegetables to grow. In my first garden, I planted okra in an area I hadn't had much time to cultivate. I pulled the weeds immediately surrounding the area and planted the seed. As expected, the seeds sprouted and my lovely okra plants burst out of the ground to about six inches tall. Then the growth stopped.

**Weeds in the garden.** I knew the problem right away. I hadn't cleared the entire plot of weeds, and those weeds began to take over the area near my stunted okra plants, which grew no more. I ended up purchasing transplants and planting them in my relatively weed-free raised bed, where the harvest was abundant.

“Other seed fell among the thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain ... They are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful,” (Mark 4:7,18-19 ESV).

**Weeds in our lives.** Just as I thought my okra would be strong enough to grow prolifically among the weeds, many of us in American churches total believe we can grow prolifically while courting the desires of the world.

We wonder why we are seeing little fruit from our efforts—few coming to faith in Christ or growing spiritually. The word has sprouted and rooted in our lives but we're six inches tall with no fruit. Meanwhile we watch our brothers and sisters who have forsaken their courtship with the American Dream grow and reproduce disciples.

Jesus tells us why this is. It couldn't be plainer. The world has deceived us. We don't realize that Jesus doesn't have our whole hearts, our whole affections.

We need to do some serious weeding.

*Jesus lists (1) the cares of the world, (2) the deceitfulness of riches, and (3) the desires for other things as the thorns that choke the word. Which of these thorns do you recognize in your life? What do you sense God leading you to do about it?*

## The Seed Sown in the Good Soil

Read: Mark 4:1-20

Focal Verses: Mark 4:8, 20

Ah, the look and feel and smell of good soil. Its dark brown-black color is unmistakable, its consistency fine and crumbly. Just raking healthy soil provides visions of abundant harvests.

**Getting there.** My soil didn't look like that at first. Instead it had more of a clay-like consistency—muddy when wet and rock-hard when dry. When I examined this soil in the fall, I knew I had to do something to get it ready for growth when spring arrived. Following the philosophy of the “Back to Eden” film, I spent hours upon hours soaking newspapers in water, placing them on the ground, and piling six inches of wood chips on top. The theory was that the newspaper would smother the weeds and the wood chips would break down into the soil, creating a rich organic top layer.

**Fertile soil.** The following fall when I raked off the top layer of wood chips, I knew my soil was ready. What once was clay was now rich, earthy, dark-brown soil. The cucumber seeds I planted sprouted immediately, taking in the fall rains and producing more cucumbers in a four-foot row than I could eat, freeze, pickle, or give away.

**The Key to Growth.** Jesus, in “The Parable of the Soils,” drove home the point that the soil is the key to growth. The labor of the farmer and the potential of the seed all depended on the condition of the soil.

The same is the case with the word of God. Our own lives will not produce an abundant harvest if we allow rocks of protection or thorns of materialism to invade our lives.

And the word we sow will have a better chance to take root if we've prepared the soil of another's heart in advance of sowing.

*Are you producing spiritual fruit or is your growth stunted? If it is stunted, is it due to a high rock or thorn content in the soil of your heart?*

*Is there someone in your life who needs the word of God but whose heart isn't ready to accept it? What can you do to help break up those hard places in their lives or help expose the thorns for the deception that they are? How can you labor into the soil of their hearts, preparing it to receive the word?*

# The Bare Garden

Read: John 6:26-36

Focal verse: John 6:27

Relaxing in the sun on a gorgeous fall Sunday, my eyes settled on my garden directly in front of me. Having picked the fall potatoes the day before, all that remained were remnants of the once striking marigolds on the border. My mind couldn't help but recall this beautiful garden at its peak.

Prolific pole beans climbing higher than I could reach. Flourishing squash. Expectant potatoes. Late summer came and the busyness of harvesting, cooking, canning, and freezing the bounty left little time to enjoy its remaining beauty. Early fall arrived and most of the beauty faded away.

**Reflections.** Now I sat, looking upon almost-bare ground in the same sunlight that caused growth just a few months ago. With Alyssa napping and Drew playing inside, I remembered the times the kids and I worked together in the garden—and the times when I begged them to play by themselves so I could get my work done.

What did it matter now? Sure, I have veggies in jars in the pantry and the freezer, but by this time next year even those will be gone. I began pondering what it would be like, sitting in this same chair, looking upon this same garden 15 years from now. What will my reflections be?

**Work that fades.** I think I'll remember digging for potatoes, the picking of beans, and the pulling of weeds with the children. I think I'll smile as I recall the kids laughingly running through the sprinkler and Alyssa stripping because her diaper got soaked. And I suspect I'll regret not lingering in those moments a little longer. I think I'll regret not asking the kids to come alongside me more, even if I couldn't get as much done that day.

My mind began to move beyond my own family. When it's all said and done, when someone else is living on the land I so carefully cultivated, what will matter?

Jesus gives some perspective. After he fed five thousand men plus women and children, he said to them, “Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval,” (John 6:27 NIV).

**Work that endures.** What will endure is what I've done for the Lord and His kingdom. When my life is over, I doubt Jesus is going to count how many cucumbers my garden produced, or how tall my beans were. I believe he's going to show me who is in the kingdom because I played a small part in their lives. I believe he's going to remind me what I did for ““the least of these,” (Matthew 25:40).

And I want THAT harvest to be plentiful!

*Are you spending most of your energy toward a harvest for God's kingdom or a harvest for your own? Who has God placed in your path to share the love of Christ? To disciple? To encourage?*

## Attention to the Seed

Read: Isaiah 58:1-11

Isaiah 58:10

I planted peas for the very first time in early March. The gardening books stated that peas are a cool-season crop that need to be harvested before the summer. I prepared the soil and planted the tiny peas in the ground. About a week later, I began checking for tiny sprouts.

Nothing.

I couldn't figure out why the peas did not sprout, and mentally prepared myself to scrap the pea idea and move on to beans. However, after a warm spell about a week later, the first pea seedlings began to emerge, one after another. I came to the conclusion that despite being a cool season crop, these seeds, like others, needed a warmer soil temperature to sprout. They simply were not going to come out of their dormancy without the warm light of the sun shining on them day after day.

**Planting seeds.** Have you ever “planted a seed” with someone, only to watch and see nothing come of it? In the Christian vernacular, I think sometimes we may tell one another we are “planting seeds” more to make ourselves feel that our effort wasn't futile than in an expectation that it will actually grow under another's care (see 1 Corinthians 3:6).

But does a farmer plant the seed and leave it? I checked on my pea seeds every single day, looking for the slightest sign of growth.

**Watching for growth.** Let's not plant the seeds of the word in another's life and leave. If possible, let's stay with them. Let's be patient and realize that the Light will continue to shine on that seed day after day before the cold soil warms up. Let's continue to be present, showing that person, “I'm not going to leave you.”

Only by the careful hand and watchful eye of the laborer, along with the persistent Light of our Savior will a cold heart warm and the seed have an opportunity to take root within.

*Have you given up hope that the seed of the word will ever sprout in the life of someone you love? Don't give up. Keep loving, keep being present, and keep bringing the Light that is in you to the soil of their heart.*

*Or are you the cold soil with the word of God sitting at your fingertips, yet it has never come alive for you? If this is you, turn your face to the Lord, asking him to warm your heart so the word can take root in the depths of your soul.*



## Too Much of a Good Thing

Read: John 16:4-15

Focal Verse: John 16:12

My young Roma tomato transplants were growing well for mid-April. I know I should have waited longer to plant them but I couldn't help myself. Vibrant green with new growth protruding from the center, they even began to form flowers (which I promptly pinched off; they were getting ahead of themselves). Soon, however, I began to notice brown edges on some of the leaves. I had never seen that before, so I looked up the condition in my Arkansas gardening guide.

It appears that the condition of the leaves indicate root injury caused by over-fertilization. I had not only added organic tomato fertilizer in the transplant holes, but I also added crushed eggshells to provide calcium (to prevent blossom-end rot).

In an effort to give them the best start possible in the unpredictable spring conditions, I inadvertently harmed them by giving them too much good stuff.

Do you ever wonder when you're reading about Jesus' conversation with his disciples why he didn't give it to them straight? Why didn't he tell them the grand plan once and for all?

The answer is in John 16:12: "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now," (ESV). He knew they couldn't handle it. The whole truth would cause more injury than growth. We can apply this truth in a couple of ways.

**Know that we don't know it all.** First, we must realize that we still don't understand everything. Even if we've grown up in church, have a religious education, or feel confident about debating any theological topic, we still don't know it all. No one does. God has so much more to teach us. Humility is of utmost importance, along with an open mind to what the Spirit wants to teach us—even if that truth runs counter to what we thought we knew.

**Gentle doses of truth.** Second, we must recognize that those we disciple need gentle doses of

truth. It is easy to allow our excitement and enthusiasm for the word to gush out without regard to whether this person is ready for it all or not. Gently, aptly-timed doses of biblical truth will give a growing believer the best opportunity to grow richly in faith.

*Examine your heart. Even if you're a mature believer, are you open for the Holy Spirit to impress truth upon you? We all still have much growing to do, and the Spirit always gives it to us in increments we can handle. Consider those under your spiritual influence. Pray about how you can share truth with them in manageable doses, as Jesus did with his disciples.*

## Grow Some Roots

Read: Psalm 1:1-3

Focal verse: Psalm 1:3

In the summer I noticed a seedling growing in my blueberry bush bed. At first I thought it was a weed but later I realized it was a small tree. Evidently in my wood chips, a walnut had found soil and sprouted. Excited about possibly having a new tree in our yard, I began to research the best time to transplant a small tree. One site recommended transplanting the tree in the fall after the leaves have been shed because in the winter the tree will experience extensive root growth.

The season when the trees look their most bare, the season when they look dead, the season when they produce nothing, is the season where their roots grow the best! In the winter, trees prepare for outward growth in the warmer months by growing an elaborate root system that enables them to withstand the oppressive heat and dry spells of summer.

**Winters in our lives.** In contemplating this lesson from nature, I began to think about the winters of our lives. Times will come when the pain or trial will be so great that we simply cannot see past it. Bearing great harvests of fruit for the kingdom of God may seem impossible when all we can muster is the strength to simply survive the day.

When we find ourselves in a winter, we should embrace it for what it is. It's cold. It's harsh. It's unrelenting. It's gray. It's lonely. It's far from productive.

But it's also temporary. It's pregnant with hope and opportunity. It's time to focus on the roots.

**Growing roots.** We grow roots by committing ourselves to the Word of God, spending time in prayer, taking in the circumstances around us, and allowing God to teach us what we couldn't have learned without those circumstances.

When the winter gives way to the hope and life of spring, it's then the roots grown in the harsh winter initiate beautiful leaves and harvests of fruit beyond imagination.

When we find ourselves in the midst of a harsh winter, let's not merely hunker down and wait for it to pass. Let's grow some roots.

*Are you in a winter season of your life right now? What roots are you growing? Where can you see God at work? What fruits could you anticipate coming from this trial?*

# Opening Our Eyes

Read: Isaiah 58

Focal Verses: Isaiah 58:6-7

Have you seen the colors on the trees change from green to shades of orange, yellow, and red? I'm sure you have. But after completing my second season of gardening, I came to a realization: I've never really "seen" the color change the way I do now.

It's almost as if, now that I have a garden, I see nature in a way I've never seen it before. For 34 years I've witnessed the changing of seasons, but never before like this.

Why haven't I? I can only come up with one reason. I haven't "worked" in nature at this level before. My family's food has never depended on this hands-on approach to provision.

I haven't been able to shake the feeling that I've lived most of my Christian life like this. There's a huge world out there with huge needs. Physical needs. Spiritual needs. Deep hurts. Wounds too profound for me to comprehend. But, for the most part, I don't see them. Not really. Not in my comfortable middle-class-suburban-Christian bubble. What will it take for me to really see these things? And once I see them, what do I do about them?

In an Isaiah 58 study I wrote, a whole section is devoted to why we should open our eyes to the genuine needs around us. Though this concept has been in my mind for over a year, I still feel blind.

I just wonder if the key to seeing could really be in the working! In other words, will I only see the need when I get my hands dirty in the work?

Just as I never could have seen nature by the sheer will of observation, perhaps God is prompting me that it will take "working the ground" to see the things to which I am blind.

In worship one autumn Sunday morning, I sat thinking, how many lost souls will never come to our church but are desperate for us to come to them?

But where do I begin? With young children and other responsibilities, how am I supposed to get "to work?"

I don't know the answer yet, but I believe God wants me to pray. I believe he wants me to understand my blindness and pray for ways my eyes can be opened. I must be willing to step out of my areas of comfort and work to fill those needs. Then I must wait for God to take the scales from my eyes, knowing only he can grant sight to those who are blind——like me.

*Do you struggle with “seeing” the needs around you? Maybe the first step—after prayer—is to just get to work. Let God show you the needs and share his heart with you in a way you’ve never “seen” before.*

# Rotting Cucumbers

Read: Luke 12:16-31

Focal Verse: Luke 12:21

My garden was coming on strong in the early summer. Tomatoes and cucumbers were plentiful. Frankly, I was having trouble eating and preserving it all before it went bad.

The cucumber vine began to look like it was almost done for the season so I picked every cucumber and took the vines to the compost, ready to plant something else in its place. Since tomatoes were coming on quickly and I was busy canning spaghetti sauce, I stuck the remaining cucumbers in my extra refrigerator in the garage, planning to freeze pickles when I had the chance.

Days turned into weeks, and weeks turned into months. My garden continued to produce with an abundance of green beans, black-eyed peas, okra, and zucchini. My cucumbers were forgotten.

Eventually, I dared to peek at my bag of cucumbers. Having given up hope of preserving them, I held out hope that I could save their seed for the next year. I opened the bag only to be greeted with mold and rot. Off to the compost bin they went.

I was angry at myself, not for failing to preserve the cucumbers, but for not giving them away. I had already frozen quarts and quarts of cucumber pickles; it wasn't as if we needed more. I was selfish. Though I had given bags of them away, I wanted to keep the last of the harvest for myself. But since I never made the time for them, they rotted. What a waste.

By hoarding the last of my cucumbers—not a huge deal in the big scheme of things—God flipped a spotlight onto my selfish heart. I wanted to keep the first, best, and last for myself. What I gave away was the extra, as long as I had already had some and knew I had more coming.

How much of my life do I spend with that attitude? “I will give when it's convenient, or when I have more than enough for myself.” Whether that giving is of my time, my efforts, my money,

or my resources, do I ever give to others before my own needs are met? Do I ever give them my best?

How much do I really trust God to provide for me if I'm focused on taking care of myself?

What God showed me had nothing to do with rotting cucumbers; they were simply a picture of my heart.

***Do you tend to give out of your excess but never the first, best, or last? It honors God when our hearts offer all of what we have, knowing he'll provide what we need.***



## “Testing” the Soil

Read: Isaiah 58:9-11

Focal Verse: Isaiah 58:11

In my first year of gardening, I was continually amazed at God’s creation. Also amazing was how many Bible stories were so much more meaningful now that I could see, in living color, what God meant by passages equating spiritual things to practical aspects of growing food.

What is clear in Jesus’ teachings is that the goal is a large harvest of rescued souls. In gardening terms, we know that the land must be fertile to achieve a large harvest.

How do we know if the “land” of our lives is fertile?

**Examining the soil.** We can examine our lives the same way we examine the health of the soil. Before scientific soil testing, the way people determined the health of their soil was by observing what was growing, as well as how it was growing.

Let me give you an example. For the past two years I’ve attempted to grow spinach, but for the past two years all I reaped were these little stubs of spinach leaves. They looked nothing like what I saw in pictures. Just months prior in that same bed, beans and cucumbers flourished. So why didn’t my spinach do well? I’ve come to believe it’s because my soil is on the acidic side and while my other crops can tolerate that, spinach cannot. What will or won’t grow in a garden plot tells me a lot about my soil.

**Examining spiritual fruit.** Similarly, we can look around to see what kind of soil we have, as individuals, as small groups, and as churches. Are we producing any kind of fruit whatsoever? If so, what are we producing? What are we not producing?

Let’s take this a little further and look at a fictitious small group scenario. Most of the members look the same. Their standard of living is similar; they dress the same; they have the same values. In some ways this is natural. We naturally tend to gravitate toward people like us. But when someone who isn’t like this group visits, does she feel welcome? Or does she feel out of

place?

Just as most plants thrive in neutral soil conditions, we need to honestly assess whether all types of people feel loved and welcome in our areas of ministry. In general, our ministry needs to have the goal of being a place where all types of people can thrive and not feel choked out, unwelcome, discarded, or judged. The most beautiful garden, after all, is one with lots of variety.

***Examine your circle of friends and any ministries you are a part of. Do you tend to attract only a certain type of person or is your group comfortable for all types of people? What adjustments might need to be made in this area?***

# When Another's Garden Gets the Rain

Read: Matthew 6:25-34, John 21:20-22

Focal Verse: Matthew 6:26

I could barely see the road in front of me. My wipers furiously tried to keep up with the downpour as I navigated my way through the steep hills and curves to a friend's house.

As I pulled into her driveway, waiting for the rain to ease up, I checked the weather app on my phone, hoping that this rain was watering my dry garden just 15 miles away.

It wasn't. That little blob of rain wasn't anywhere near my home and was not heading there, either. My whole summer seemed to be like this. Every day I'd find myself hopeful at just a 30% chance of rain. Several days I watched thunderclouds pass me by only to drop its moisture a mile away. Why was everyone around me getting rain when I was not?

I know it's not like I live in the pre-irrigation days. Water was available from our faucet. But my garden needed pure rain, and I was starting to feel a little gypped by Mother Nature.

Was I forgotten?

**The jealousy trap.** Sometimes, when we long for something so desperately, it's easy to watch in jealousy as others around us reap the blessings for which we had prayed. Sometimes we feel forgotten by God. Without realizing it, we spiral into self-pity—or even deeper.

**Not forgotten.** You know what happened a few days after that drenched trip to my friend's house? One sunny afternoon, a steady shower popped out up out of nowhere and my garden soaked up the much-needed rain.

I looked at the radar to see that small blob of rain sitting right above me and only me. This time I felt like I wasn't forgotten.

**God our provider.** The truth is, sometimes we simply don't know why others seem to be getting the blessings we desire. We don't know why our hearts remain parched while our friends' cups

runneth over. But what we do know is that God is our Provider. He knows exactly what we need—and don't need—at any given moment.

Sometimes he withholds the proverbial rain to teach us to trust him in the drought. Other times, it's to spur us to press unto him in prayer. And at still other times, we may simply never know. One thing we know with absolute certainty is that we can trust him.

***What is it in your life that causes you to worry? Do you have a tendency to compare your lot in life to another's? Confess your tendency to God and pray to seek his kingdom above all else, knowing that he is your provider and will meet your every need.***

## From Dead Pod to New Seed

Read: John 12:20-26

Focal Verse: John 12:24

In August, when okra production is at its peak, skipping even one day of harvesting will yield tough okra pods that cannot be eaten. When this happened last year, I left a few pods on the plant to let them mature completely. Once they became tough and dry, I cut them off. My son and I had a great time scraping the black seeds out of the pods to save for this year's planting.

As the following year's warm May sun signaled the time for planting okra again, I pulled out my envelope of okra seeds that came from last year's productive plants. After planting them in the soil, I was surprised when they germinated within days. This brought to mind exactly how these seeds came to be.

**White seeds, black seeds.** Seeds from fresh okra pods are white and soft. They are still part of a living pod. Only a "dead" pod yields the hard, black seeds that will be used to produce the next year's crop. It takes the death of the seed to produce new life.

**From death to life.** Jesus' disciples did not understand that Jesus had to die in order for his people to experience the saving grace of the gospel. They did not grasp that this truth is written in the very fabric of nature and has been since creation.

Every time I plant a seed I am reminded of this. For life to spring forth, the seed has to die. This first points to Jesus. But it also points to us.

**Dying to ourselves.** We, similarly, must die to ourselves to gain life in Christ. That's why Jesus said if we are to follow him, we must deny ourselves first, take up our cross, and then follow him (Matthew 16:24).

Many times we want to produce seed from a living pod. We want to go about our lives, nourishing our own desires, while at the same time living for Jesus. But according to Jesus, it doesn't work that way. Only when we die to ourselves—to our desires, our needs, our personal

ambitions, our pet sins—will we ever find the fruitful life that Christ intended for us.

And when we do, subsequent plants grow and grow, producing fruit and seeds for many seasons.

***Are you trying to produce fruit for the kingdom from a living pod? What fleshly desires need to die in your life for Christ to produce an abundant harvest through you? What will you do about it?***

## Longing for Rain

Read: Deuteronomy 32:1-4, Isaiah 55:10-11

Focal Verse: Deuteronomy 32:2

In the hot Arkansas summer, it's not uncommon to go weeks without rain. And during those times, I realize that my city water isn't cutting it for my garden. Granted, city water delays plant death. But it merely sustains an existence of meager, stunted growth. My vegetables produce less, and the quality is not as healthy.

Rain, however, promotes life. It causes vegetation to flourish, thrive, and grow vigorously. With this life-giving rain, my vegetables are abundant, beautiful, and healthy.

How common is it for our Christian lives to merely survive on water? What we really need is the rain of the Spirit.

**Easy water.** In our first-world country, water is an available resource. It only requires the turn of a faucet—not prayer or faith. Essentially, water is easy.

Spiritually speaking, water is also available. It's everywhere! Sermons online, sermons at the local church, blogs from theologians, blogs from everyday Joes like me, published books, self-published e-books, you name it. The problem is, we won't consistently grow spiritually on someone else's filtration of pure spiritual water.

We try this new Bible study and that new program and wonder why it simply isn't working. Our lives aren't being changed. Others aren't coming to a saving faith in Christ. And because we become comfortable in that cycle, we cease to long for the real thing.

We've gotten lazy. We've become content with second best, with that which simply sustains us. We expect to grow without praying that the Spirit will come to us personally, without praying that the heavens will open for us and rain down!

**Pure Living Water.** God doesn't simply want to sustain us. He wants to provide his living

water so we can GROW, not only personally, but also for the kingdom, where lives are changed and people are saved.

Are you longing for the heavens to open and the Spirit of God to rain down on you? On your church? I am! So where do we start? I'm not saying ditch the sermons or the blogs or the books. These expressions of the spiritual gifting of God's people do have their place in our growth. But instead of relying on these sources exclusively, first seek the Father through reading his thirst-quenching Word.

***What about you? Are you merely subsisting on water when you long for rain? If you don't already have a regular Bible reading plan, commit to start one today. If you don't know where to start, I recommend beginning in one of the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke or John).***



## Return to Linger

Read: Revelation 2:1-7

Focal Verse: Revelation 2:4

About halfway through this book, I started running out of ideas. The seemingly endless amount of garden devotionals had been written and my book wasn't finished. I couldn't understand why my idea stream had dried up.

Then I realized something. I hadn't taken as much time to enjoy my garden lately.

Oh sure, I had done some weeding and planting. But most of that was simply chore work. I hadn't lingered in the garden, marveling at God's creation. If I were going to get back to the inspiration behind this book, I had to get back in the garden.

**Spiritually dry.** Similar to my ideas drying up, we can find our service to God drying up, as well. The initial inspiration was to serve him and join him in his redemptive mission, but somewhere along the way, we stopped lingering. Perhaps our Bible study became a rote habit instead of refreshing spiritual nourishment to our souls. Perhaps our prayers became composed of one-sentence breaths, or the same daily recitation that sounded more like a chant than a conversation with our Father.

**Work without love.** The church at Ephesus had this same problem in Revelation 2. They were did great works for God. They stood up for truth. They opposed evil. They endured hardships for the sake of Christ. But in all of their work, they lost the love that brought them to those works in the first place.

Whether we're exhausting ourselves "doing" work for God, or whether we've given up and are doing nothing because we're burned out, the remedy is the same. Linger a while.

**Linger.** "Consider how far you have fallen. Repent, and do the things that you did at first," (Revelation 2:5 ESV). Repent means to turn the other direction. The other direction is getting back into fellowship with the Father. It's lingering at his feet, letting him be our nourishment.

***Have you stopped lingering at the feet of the Father? What steps can you take today to restore that love relationship?***

# Winds of Preparation

Read: 1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Focal Verse: 1 Corinthians 3:6

Although tomatoes are the most popular crop in a home garden, they are quite peculiar in their early growth habits. If you grow them from seed indoors, experts say that they benefit from a small fan being placed next to them because it allows the stem to become stronger, making a healthier plant.

What can we learn from this peculiar growth preference of tomatoes?

**Reflex of protection.** When it comes to our children or to “babies in the faith,” our natural tendency is to try to protect them and keep them in a safe, sheltered environment where no challenges to their faith are allowed. We don’t teach them how to defend their faith, how to respond to legitimate questions, or how to deal with their own doubts. Many times we don’t know the answers ourselves, and ultimately we fear they won’t hold up under a challenge.

Just as we cannot keep a tomato plant in a small, enclosed container and expect it to grow and produce fruit, we cannot protect our young ones in the faith from the world. And if we do not equip them to respond to questions that arise from the world, they are unprepared to the winds and rains they’ll encounter there.

How many of our “church kids” have we lost to the world simply because they were unprepared when hit with challenges against which their fragile faith was helpless to defend? Too many, I’m afraid.

**Test of faith.** I recall clearly as a senior in college, speaking with my academic advisor, a psychology professor with whom I had a great working relationship, about my faith. Not only was I unsuccessful in convincing him of the truth, but also for the first time in my life, I got it. I understood why he didn’t believe. I understood why many don’t believe. And if it hadn’t been for the previous preparation from my strong upbringing in the word of God and for my personal

experiences with Christ, I would have easily fallen victim to winds of intellectualism.

**Embracing winds of challenge.** Whether it's our own children or children in the faith who are under our sphere of influence, we must allow some winds of challenge to blow into their lives. Allow them to ask hard questions. If we don't know the answers, we can ask a more mature believer, or research the question ourselves. We are fortunate to have credible online resources at our fingertips.

The strongest faith is often forged by exploring alternatives and realizing the word of God really is true. Such faith is often stronger than one never tested. And the best time for that testing is when under our watchful, loving care.

*Are you in the charge of young Christians or children? Always stay open to questions and seek to answer them. Be honest when you don't know the answer but try to find out. Don't shy from the hard questions. If you don't seek to answer them, the world will.*

*Or are you a young Christian? Embrace the hard questions. God knows it all and isn't threatened by them. Ask him for wisdom. Seek guidance from more mature believers. Your faith will only grow stronger by seeking wisdom, not ignoring difficult questions.*

## Weeds Among the Carrots

Read: Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Focal Verse: Matthew 13:29-30

In the middle of the summer, my best efforts to contain the weeds became futile. One blog I read called it the “summer solstice weed race” and I believe it. Eventually I was able to hoe and pull the weeds from around many crops, but one crop proved to be exceptionally tedious.

Carrots.

Long weeds and prolific grasses grew in the middle of my carrot patch. I was forced to sit down to begin the tedious task of identifying carrot tops from weeds. Once I grasped what I thought to be the unwelcome growth, I’d pull it. Most of the time, I was right. But several times I pulled out my premature carrots instead.

In addition, many times the weed grew so close to the carrot that, even though the carrot wasn’t pulled, its soil was so disturbed that I doubted its growth.

Jesus spoke of this in the Parable of the Weeds. Aside from my gardening application, how does this apply to us in our Christian walk?

First, we need to recognize that “weeds” will appear in our churches, small groups, and any place where the body of Christ meets and seeks to do kingdom work. It would be naive to assume everyone is wheat.

Second, we need to pray for the discernment to recognize the weeds for what they are. Just as weeds steal light, water, and valuable nutrients from garden plants, the weeds in our congregations steal joy and energy and will hamper the growth of the church.

Just as my garden weeds grew the fastest and most aggressively as the days were the longest, expect the weeds in the church to be more active during times of growth when the Spirit is shining his light on the church.

Third, we must resist the urge to “pull” the weeds once we recognize them. Sure, some issues should be lovingly addressed head-on as we see elsewhere in Scripture, but we must proceed with care, lest the good growth is uprooted as well.

*Do you need to pray for discernment regarding any weeds in your midst? How might the Parable of the Weeds speak to your circumstance?*

## Root of Bitterness

Read: Hebrews 12:3-15

Focal Verse: Hebrews 12:15

Several weeds give me fits, but the dandelion is in a category all its own. Have you ever attempted to pull a dandelion by its root? It's almost impossible.

A dandelion is not unlike other weeds. What makes it unique is the depth and strength of its root. If you pick a dandelion, only for the plant to break off at the root, sure enough, the plant will grow back. A dandelion cannot be effectively plucked unless the entire root is pulled. The same is true with bitterness.

**A bitter root with bitter fruit.** How do we know that a dandelion root exists? We see the dandelion plant or flower. How do we know that a root of bitterness exists? We see fruits of that bitterness. Sometimes the fruit can be obvious, such as gossip, slander, jealousy and/or whining. But sometimes the fruit looks like any other flower in the field, which makes it hard to identify. Many times bitterness takes the form of irritability, depression, isolation, negativity, and/or lack of concern for others.

**Uprooting bitterness.** After recognizing that bitterness is present by the fruit it has produced, discovering what has caused the bitterness in the first place is the next step in uprooting it. Many times the root is unforgiveness, hurt feelings, or anger. Once we identify the root, then we can repent of sin and prayerfully work through the process of eradicating it.

Do we need to extend forgiveness? Do we need to seek reconciliation? Do we need to admit our own fault and simply let it go? Getting rid of the root will be hard work, especially if it has been entrenched for a long time.

Striving for pulling up that root of bitterness is essential for peace: peace with ourselves or peace in a church, a marriage, a family, a friendship, or a workplace. Where there is a root, there will always be fruit. The longer we allow the bitterness to grow, the more fruit it produces.

***Do you see evidence of bitterness in your life? What steps can you take to get rid of the root of bitterness? Some roots go deeper than we can deal with on our own. Don't be afraid to seek help, whether that is from a Christian counselor or a spiritual adviser.***



# The Unexpected Marigold

Read: John 5:16-23

Focal Verses: John 5:17

I tilled and made rows, carefully placing each seed in the furrow, then covered them up. Rain came. I waited.

And waited.

And waited.

When three weeks passed and the only green shoots were weeds, I gave up.

Next year, I suppose I'll try my hand at corn again.

I tilled and made rows. I carefully placed each potato piece in the furrow and covered them up. I didn't have to wait long for the potato vines to emerge in the summer soil. But into early fall the vines began to die back too soon. My fall crop last year and spring crop this year were extremely productive. What went wrong?

I suppose I'll try again next year.

My extremely productive Roma tomato plants were nearing their end. Unexpectedly, a beautiful marigold began to grow in between the plants. As the tomato plants slumped, the marigold—which I never planted—flourished! Its beauty surpassed every other marigold I had planted.

It's just like life, isn't it? We may work and work, planting seeds while pouring ourselves into people. We may labor and see initial growth only to watch it fade away before any fruit of our labor is seen.

With enough letdowns—like my corn and potato crops—it may be tempting to give up. Why do I work so hard with nothing to show for it? What's the use of continuing to labor?

Sure, I would have loved to harvest a rich bounty of corn and potatoes, but do you know what

that unexpected marigold provided? On the outside my eyes beheld the blessing of a rich display of fall colors in the midst of the fading tomato plants. In the unseen underground, the marigold's root system is known to emit a chemical that deters pests in the soil. Not exactly what I had planned, but beautiful and useful nonetheless.

We never know where God is working, but we can be assured that he never stops. His work may be different than what we expect but we will see his activity if we open our eyes to the unexpected.

***Are you discouraged that your labor for the Kingdom is showing little fruit? Look around. God is always at work. And he may have placed a marigold in a place you haven't yet thought to look.***

# Everything We Need

Read: 2 Peter 1:3-4 and James 1:5-6

Focal Verse: 2 Peter 1:3

The Southern summer's heat and humidity bring days of misery with little relief. Rain is sparse and energy to work in the garden runs thin.

Many of the fruits and vegetables in the garden show strain. But not all of them. In fact, watermelons, cantaloupes, and cucumbers thrive. It's time to pick that watermelon and dig in. To slice that cucumber and hear it crunch.

Have you ever noticed that at the time of year when our bodies need more fluid, the fruit and vegetables with the highest water content are the ones that are ready to pick?

**Master designer.** Our God, our Creator, is also a master designer. He knew what our bodies would need and when. Year after year, the earth provides for our bodies' needs through the fruit and vegetables in season.

If he meets our bodily needs with such precision, how much more so will he provide what we need for our spiritual lives?

“His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence,” (2 Peter 1:3 ESV).

**All things.** When we don't know what to pray, he provides the Holy Spirit to help us (Romans 8:26). When we don't know how to handle a conflict, he provides a plan in his Word (Matt. 18:15-18). When time for a decision comes and we're unsure which path to take, he will guide us (Proverbs 3:5-6). When we don't know the words to say to defend our faith or share Jesus with another, the Holy Spirit will provide the words (Luke 12:12).

And when we're utterly clueless, wisdom is just a prayer away (James 1:5).

God's will isn't an I-Spy game where we have to search to find the right picture to fit in our

life's decisions. He longs to show us his heart and his purposes. He longs to provide us with everything we need, and that provision comes through the knowledge of him. We only need to seek it.

*Are you dealing with a situation in your life where you need divine power to bring clarity? Pray James 1:5 and 2 Peter 1:3, asking for wisdom. When we ask with a pure heart, seeking the perfect will of God, he will provide.*

# The Soil of the Heart

Read: Psalm 71:15-18

Focal verse: Psalm 1:2

The Christmas before beginning my first big garden, my mom bought me a book on gardening. I wanted to skip right to the vegetables but instead I read from the beginning. I remember learning about types of soil and how important it is to know what type you have.

**Types of soils.** Clay soil is full of nutrients but since it doesn't drain well, the new plants have a hard time accessing those nutrients. Sandy soil drains extremely well, causing the plant to be unable to access the water it needs. Loam soil is a mixture of the two. Because loam drains well but not too fast, plants have access to both the water and the nutrients it needs.

**The soil of our hearts.** Our hearts can be described similarly in how we use the living water of the word. Some of us are like clay. We take the water and keep it to ourselves. Others are like sand. As soon as we get a drink of the living water, we can't wait to tell someone about it, even before we have had a chance to get a healthy drink ourselves.

**Tendencies.** The most gifted teachers of the Word tend to be like sandy soil. It is in our nature to want to share truths we are given to others. But, for those truths to have their full effect in our lives, we must pause and let that water soak in before we rush to share it.

Students of the word tend to be like clay soil. We soak it in but don't see that sharing what we've learned can benefit others. But in fact, God's truth is given to us not only for our edification but also for the benefit of others.

**The best soil.** Ideally, we will seek to be loam. When we drink in a healthy dose of living water, let it nourish us from the deepest roots to the tallest stem, and then let it out to share with others who will benefit from the drink as well.

*Which soil of heart do you most tend to be like? If your heart is clay or sand, how can you make changes in your Bible study to become healthy loam?*



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