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GARDEN

Devotional

How to Use This Devotional

This has been a somewhat impulsive project. After hearing a good number of people around me share about how God has met them in their gardens, their walks among the trees, the sound of birds, the beauty of stars and sunsets and the sacred art of weeding, I started thinking maybe we should collect some of these.

And it just kind of escalated from there.

And because Bethany kept calling it 'The Garden Devotional' in her head, and now all the other alternative titles sound weird, that's what this is.

The Garden Devotional is a collection of meditations on Scripture and God's good creation, some of which come from members in our congregation, others that have been collected from other authors, ministers, theologians, and gardeners. All of these have been lovingly crafted, gathered, and shared as a gift, to help us contemplate our God and the truths He is patiently and lovingly cultivating in our very being.

This is a curated collection, arranged in a recommended reading order, of a stunningly wide array of styles and perspectives, beautiful, unique, and creative. Our God is a creative God who delights in variety. His kids are pretty creative too.

To use this devotional, first pray and ask God to speak to you. The whole point is to commune with God. We recommend you read the devotionals in order - whenever you read the Scripture passages, we encourage you to read *slowly*, ideally out loud (the Bible was written to be read aloud) and at least twice.

There are 34 entries, and you have all summer. Or however long you want this to take. So if an entry feels long, or there are a lot of Scriptures and it's like drinking from a firehose, take a few days to go through it slowly, savouring a nice, long walk with God. And if you're having the *best* time, keep going! Linger in God's presence and drink deep.

We pray that these incline your heart toward God in gratitude, in prayer, and in worship. We pray that as you spend time in God's Scriptures and in His creation, you will hear His Voice. We pray God teaches us to slow down... get close to the earth... walk with Him in His garden... let Him love us down to our very souls.

Part I: Delight in the Lord

*The one thing I ask of the Lord—
the thing I seek most—
is to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life,
delighting in the Lord's perfections
and meditating in His Temple.*

- Psalm 27:4

Side note: if you are reading these entries and think, 'Golly, I think God has shown me some things through nature too' then please send them to us! We'd love to try to make this a yearly collection, so as soon as anything comes to mind, please send it to discipleship@brookswodbaptist.com or give it to Bethany. We'll collect all year and review submissions as we go (and if you want support on the writing side, Bethany will be glad to help!).

What Happened to Humility? with Richard Foster & Brenda Quinn

Read: Romans 1:20, Philippians 2:1-11, Romans 12

This excerpt is from The Holy Post Podcast interview with Richard Foster & Brenda Quinn (episode 568) about their book Learning Humility: A Year of Searching for a Vanishing Virtue. The full podcast is available on Spotify.

Skye: These days, no doubt social media and smartphones haven't helped as they've made us all more self-absorbed and the age of self-deprecating Hollywood stars, musicians, athletes, and politicians feels like ancient history. *But as* my guest Richard Foster points out in his new book, humility has always been upheld as a virtue by the church, at least until recently. The rise of mega-ministries, celebrity pastors, and a desire to 'change the world for Jesus' has resulted in humility being increasingly seen as a barrier to God's Mission rather than clear evidence of His power. Foster's new book is called *Learning Humility: A Year of Searching for a Vanishing Virtue*. Richard Foster is the founder of Renovare, he's written extensively about Christian spiritual formation including a number of modern classics like *Streams of Living Water*, *Prayer*, and *Celebration of Discipline*. I'm joined today by Brenda Quinn, a pastor of spiritual formation in Denver, who assisted Richard Foster with the book. She's particularly focused on what it looks like to cultivate humility at the congregational and community level. Here's my conversation with Richard Foster and Brenda Quinn.

Skye: Let me begin for both of you with this question: Why, given that extensive history of humility in the Church, is humility a vanishing virtue in our culture?

Richard: Isn't that an interesting fact? I mean, when we look at that, that was one of the things really early on I kept asking myself: Why has it been such a prominent virtue all through Christian history until our own time, when somehow tradition got cut off? That's what led me to just see what I could learn about it. And of course, the press of our culture, it moves in a totally opposite direction. I just wanted to give a run at it and see if we can counter that a little bit. Because coming in touch with Jesus, oh my... I mean, there is humility all over the place. It's plastered all over. So we want to see it, have a revival...

Skye: What do you think is required for somebody to both be actively engaged in important work in the world and maintain that sense of humility at the same time?

Richard: They seem opposed to one another, but here they were together in One Person. What does that require? It requires first a teachability. Humility and teachability come very close to one another, because if I'm not teachable then how can humility develop in my life? Arrogance, narcissism, this self-focus that we see so

often, it's learning to get away from that. The first thing is we learn to 'know ourselves', as Aristotle taught us. That simple knowledge... I mean, when you think of humility, it means 'being very close to the earth'... We don't exalt ourselves beyond what's appropriate, and we don't degrade ourselves beyond what's appropriate; we come to know ourselves. That's the first thing, and then the teachability that I need to grow....

Skye: You said earlier that the word 'humility' means 'earthly' or 'close to the ground or the dirt.' There's so much nature throughout this book, your own reflections as you look out your window and a number of other things... What is the role of Nature and the natural world and Creation teaching us humility?

Richard: The great devotional writers tell us that were to read two books: the Bible and the Book of Nature. Often, we've forgotten the second one and so I've tried to give some attention to that and to learn from the world in which we live. There's a reflection of the life of God in all of these things. Now, I don't mean any kind of identification with nature as divine or none of that, but just that this is the created order and God invites me to learn. To learn from creation.

The Lakota calendar just felt like a nice way to think about that... when I made the decision that this was going to work like a journal, that's why I gravitated toward the Lakota calendar, because of its deep connection to the Earth. 'The moon when the ducks come back', I love that.

Skye: It just fits thematically so nicely with that. When you place yourself within the larger cosmos you feel small. You're humbled. And that's what that calendar kind of brings back in front of us. Brenda, how do you help people engage appropriately with nature in a more urban or suburban context, when we seem so isolated and distant from nature?

Brenda: Romans chapter one talks about God revealing Himself in the world, in creation. I think wherever you live, you've got some kind of nature around you. I don't think it takes mountains or any kind of spectacular photographic scenery to be able to enjoy. There's beauty in every kind of landscape. We've all got the outdoors around us in some way, even if we're right in the middle of an urban city. We can still go to parks and other places, it's so important for us to get out of the indoors and breathe the fresh air. No matter where we are, we experience God there, when we're in that place.

I love this book and the fact that he brought in the Lakota people. All the Native Americans were so close to the Earth. Humility is the very first virtue of the Lakota people, you know. That's not coincidence, that's a revelation from God. And I believe that that came through nature, through their connection to nature; they learned so much about the Creator God because they were so tied to His world.

And that's biblical, that fits with Romans chapter one. They learned a lot about God and about His character and the things that are important for people because they were connected to His Earth. That's the same for us; we need to keep that connection.

Garden of Devotion by Heidi Duncan

Read: Ephesians 2:8-9; Psalm 147:4; Romans 5:1-11; Psalm 68:9

As I stand over the spot where new seeds were just planted, I feel, Lord, You stood over me as my faith warmed from the inside and sprouted, then grew.

Tonight, the stars You placed in the sky fill my eyes with tears with the beauty and stillness in awestruck gratitude; I praise You.

The flowers and trees in full bloom remind me that You see beauty in us all, even when we are all sinners. Your mercy is beautiful and covers the ugly thorns.

As the rain and sun nourishes the waiting seeds in my garden, so You nourish my soul as it grows closer to You each morning with Your voice and comfort, my Heavenly Father. How I long to turn my face to Your light just as the flowers do.

The Biblical Meaning of Garden: A Divine Symbol of Creation and Redemption by Michael Anderson (johnbaptistchurch.org/biblical-meaning-nature/garden#)

In the Bible, gardens hold a significant spiritual symbolism that goes beyond their natural beauty. They are depicted as sacred spaces where humanity first encountered God and where His redemptive plan is beautifully unveiled. The biblical meaning of garden carries profound messages about creation, restoration, and intimacy with the divine.

From the very beginning, in the book of Genesis, we see the garden of Eden as a place of harmony and perfection. It was a lush paradise where Adam and Eve walked and communed intimately with God. However, sin brought a separation between humanity and God, leading to the expulsion from this idyllic garden. Yet, even in this punishment, there is a glimmer of hope, as God promises a future redemption.

Throughout the Bible, gardens continue to represent restoration and new beginnings. In Isaiah 51:3, God promises to turn the deserts into “an Eden, the garden of the LORD.” This imagery highlights His power to transform barrenness into fertility and life. Moreover, gardens serve as reminders of the ultimate redemption found in Jesus Christ. In the Gospel of John, Mary encounters the resurrected Jesus outside an empty tomb, mistakenly perceiving Him as the gardener (John 20:15). This powerful encounter emphasizes how Jesus, the true Gardener, brings spiritual restoration and new life to all who believe in Him.

Join us in this insightful exploration of the biblical meaning of garden, as we delve into Scripture to uncover the profound symbolism and spiritual truths hidden within these sacred spaces. Through a deeper understanding of gardens in the Bible, we can draw closer to God and experience His transformative work in our lives.

The Biblical Meaning of Garden

In the Bible, the notion of a garden holds significant symbolism and spiritual significance. Gardens are mentioned throughout Scripture, from the Garden of Eden in the book of Genesis to the beautiful gardens described in the Song of Solomon. Understanding the biblical meaning of garden can help us gain insight into God’s plan for humanity, His relationship with us, and the spiritual lessons we can learn.

The Garden of Eden: Paradise Lost

One of the most well-known gardens in the Bible is the Garden of Eden. In Genesis, we read about how God created Adam and Eve and placed them in this lush and abundant garden. The garden represented a perfect communion between

humanity and God, a place of peace, provision, and fellowship. It was a physical manifestation of God's love and care for His creation.

However, the Garden of Eden also serves as a reminder of humanity's fall from grace. Adam and Eve were given freedom of choice but ultimately succumbed to temptation and sinned against God. Their disobedience led to their expulsion from the garden, symbolizing the separation between humanity and God caused by sin.

Garden as a Symbol of Restoration

Throughout Scripture, gardens often symbolize restoration and renewal. In Isaiah 51:3, God promises to comfort His people and turn their wilderness into a garden of delight. This imagery communicates God's desire to bring healing and restoration to His people, transforming desolation into abundance.

In the New Testament, Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection are often associated with a garden. After Jesus's death, He was buried in a tomb located in a garden. This garden tomb then became a place of new life and resurrection when Jesus triumphantly rose from the dead. This event signifies God's ultimate plan of redemption and the restoration of humanity's relationship with Him.

The Biblical Meaning of Garden: Part 2 by Michael Anderson (johnbaptistchurch.org/biblical-meaning-nature/garden#)

The Spiritual Lessons from Gardens

Gardens in the Bible offer valuable spiritual lessons for believers. Firstly, they remind us of God's provision. Just as He provided for Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, He continues to provide for our physical and spiritual needs today.

Read: Genesis 1-2

Gardens also illustrate the importance of cultivation. Just as a gardener tends to their plants, we must cultivate our relationship with God through prayer, worship, and studying His Word. Just as plants require nourishment and care to grow, our faith requires intentional cultivation to deepen and mature.

Read: Psalm 1:1-3, Colossians 3:16, & Philippians 4:4-9\

Additionally, gardens demonstrate the beauty of diversity. In a garden, various plants coexist and thrive, each contributing its unique qualities. Similarly, God has created us with diverse gifts, talents, and purposes. Embracing and appreciating our unique individuality allows us to contribute to the flourishing of God's Kingdom.

Read: 1 Corinthians 12-13 & Revelation 7:9-12

The Biblical Meaning of Garden: Part 3 by Michael Anderson
(johnbaptistchurch.org/biblical-meaning-nature/garden#)

Conclusion

“For as the earth brings forth its sprouts, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to sprout up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to sprout up before all the nations.”

Isaiah 61:11

The biblical meaning of garden encompasses themes of creation, restoration, provision, and cultivation. From the Garden of Eden to the garden tomb, we see how gardens serve as powerful symbols of God’s love, grace, and plan for humanity. As we reflect on the biblical significance of gardens, may we be encouraged to cultivate our relationship with God, embrace our unique identity, and seek His restoration in our lives.

Unveiling the Biblical Significance of Gardens: A Brief Overview

In the Bible, the garden represents a place of abundance, beauty, and harmony. It symbolizes the perfect relationship between God and humanity before the fall. The biblical meaning of the garden is a reminder of God’s provision, care, and the importance of cultivating a deep connection with Him.

In conclusion, understanding the biblical meaning of a garden goes beyond its literal significance of a physical space filled with plants and flowers. The garden holds a rich symbolic and spiritual meaning in the Bible, representing themes of God’s creation, provision, and restoration.

As we explore the biblical references to gardens, we are reminded of the Garden of Eden, where humanity first experienced fellowship with God before sin entered the world. It serves as a reminder of God’s original intention for His people to dwell in harmony with Him.

Throughout the Bible, we find gardens as places of solace, prayer, and encounter with God. Just as Jesus found peace in the Garden of Gethsemane before His crucifixion, we can seek God’s presence and guidance in the quietness and beauty of a garden.

Moreover, gardens are often associated with growth and nourishment. In Isaiah 58:11, we read, *“And the Lord will guide you continually and satisfy your desire in scorched places and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail.”* (Isaiah 58:11)

This verse reminds us that God’s provision and blessings are abundant, just like a well-watered garden.

Additionally, the biblical meaning of a garden extends to the concept of restoration and renewal. In the book of Revelation, we find the imagery of the New Jerusalem adorned with lush gardens, where there will be no more pain or suffering. *“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.”(Revelation 22:1-2)*

In this final vision, we witness the ultimate fulfillment of God’s plan for restoration and renewal, where gardens represent the abundant life that awaits believers in eternity.

As we delve into the biblical meaning of a garden, let us be reminded of the beauty, provision, and hope embedded in this symbolic representation. May we find solace, refreshment, and spiritual nourishment as we meditate on the gardens depicted in the Scriptures, ultimately pointing us to our loving Creator who desires to restore and renew all things.

Fearfully & Wonderfully Made by Renée Netterfield

To write a devotional around time in the garden is brilliant. My heart is filled with praise for my Heavenly Father as I see the amazing flowers, shrubs, and trees all around us. Tiny little white flowers on the low growing ground cover I am beginning to see as a weed, is still a delight to the eyes, even as I dig and pull and toss in the yard bag. Roses of all colors delight the heart, rhododendrons, azaleas, hydrangeas, peonies, and on and on. Big bushes with little flowers, big bushes with big flowers, little bushes with big flowers, and on and on it goes. Pink, purple, red, peach, yellow, blue, white, and everything in between fills the heart with joy. And every plant has its own nature. Leaves and petals, stems and branches give clues as to what plant it came from - each after its own kind. And yet God, in His great love of creation has also made it possible for us to graft and manipulate and change an apple or plum or rose into something else to delight the eye or tongue. He has enabled us to partner with Him in creation.

God is extravagant in His creation, filling the earth with more growing things of the earth than one can put in one book. Beautiful things, ugly things, sweet things, bitter things, wonderful smells and terrible smells. (We inherited a beautiful flower when we moved to our current home. Large dark green leaves produced beautiful,

huge (6 - 10 inches long) black-purple lily-type flowers that smelled like rotting flesh.)

Romans 1: 19 - 20

“. . . what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities - His eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that we are without excuse.”

How many beautiful things are you able to see outside your home or on your drive to work that lifts your heart in praise?

Genesis 1:11

And God said: “Let the land produce vegetation; seed bearing plants and trees. . . “And God saw that it was good.” Amen!

Excerpt from *Prayer* by Mark Batterson

Prayer, in its pristine form, is a communion with God. Sin broke this communion, but the blood of Jesus Christ has restored it.

Unfortunately, many Christians feel that if they have been delivered from sin, they have automatically entered into the fullness of redemption. They fail to understand that Jesus did not come simply to remove sin from our lives. This is only part of the process.

He came to restore our fellowship with the Father. Removing of sin is a vital verity, but it is not the purpose of the process. Until we have been restored to the level of fellowship with God that Adam forfeited, the work on the cross is not yet complete in our lives.

Pure prayer is not manipulation of God; it is relationship with God. It goes far beyond asking and starts enjoying His presence. Prayer is talking to the Father, not simply because we are confused or confounded, but because we are lonesome for Him.

David seemed to understand this, for he wrote in Psalm 27:4:

*The one thing I ask of the Lord— the thing I seek most—
is to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life,
delighting in the Lord's perfections and meditating in his Temple.*

Quieting Your Worries from *Breathe* by Bonnie Gray

She was standing in front of the bouquets of flowers, with a shopping basket in one hand, a purse slung across her shoulder, and her hair straggled from a long day at the office. It was rush hour, when women from all walks of life intersected at Trader Joe's to pick up food for dinner.

"Hard to decide what to pick, huh?" I turned to smile.

"Yeah," she answered with a chuckle, probably to be polite. She wore a cool pair of spectacles and had a cute wrinkle in her nose when she smiled.

"What are you deciding between?" I asked.

My new friend told me she wasn't sure. She said she would often stand there, unable to choose. Then she'd go home with her groceries, without any flowers.

"That used to happen to me all the time," I said. "I wouldn't be able to decide between the flowers I really wanted and the ones that cost less."

"Yes! Exactly!" my bespectacled friend interjected. She turned to me now with recognition. We were of the same tribe. Women who were unable to bring flowers home to enjoy.

"I'd talk myself out of it," I confided. "I'd say, 'It's not worth it. They'll only last a few days,' I later realized that what I was actually saying was, "I am not worth it. What I find joy in for a few days isn't worth it."

"So true." My friend nodded in wide-eyed agreement.

I told her I had lost my spark a few years ago. I had been good at taking care of others and getting things done. But I hadn't been good at nurturing my own heart or taking care of my well-being. So I became overwhelmed with stress and worries - even though I was good at working hard, pleasing others, surviving, and pushing through. But in my honest moments, I longed to find my spark of joy again.

Women are heroes when it comes to loving and caring for others. But why is it so hard to give ourselves permission to rest and refresh when we're stressed and need it most?

I asked my new friend if there were flowers she loved as a little girl, and if there were different flowers she liked more as she grew up.

This stranger-turned-kindred-spirit started sharing stories about why sunflowers made her happy. They reminded her of summer and riding her bike with a white basket adorned with a plastic sunflower. But lately, she was drawn to hydrangeas because they were soothing.

"Your stories are special," I said. "There's something about flowers. About how God made them. How God made us. I've even read articles that show simply looking at flowers improves emotional health."

"Really?" My new friend was intrigued.

"You are worth it," I told her as I looked in her eyes, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder. "You are worth taking care of."

Deep inside us, God created an inner spirit that needs nurturing. We were made to be loved, valued, and given attention. We all need permission to take better care of ourselves. We all need a friend to help us remember this truth.

How about you? Do you find that when you're feeling the most stressed, you often put your well-being last on the list because you wonder whether any snippets of beauty or joy are worth it - if *you're* even worth it? As self-reliant women, we're used to being strong and resourceful as our default mode. Yet do you ever wish you could receive the love and care you give so generously to others?

Is it easier to put your heart to the side while you take care of everyone and everything else? Maybe like me, you feel that taking time to do things that are nurturing to your body and emotions seems too lavish, impractical, and even selfish.

You're not alone. We all need encouragement to stress less. For many of us who grew up as encouragers, carers, and optimists, we easily tune into the needs of others. But we are unaware of our own until we find ourselves waking up to brain fog, lying awake at night worried, overthinking or feeling exhausted without a clue as to how we got there. Even more difficult is figuring how to rest, choose joy, or take time out to de-stress.

We are no longer present. We are captured by our anxieties - tethered to regrets of the past, the demands of the day, or the uncertainties of the future. We can hardly breathe.

Jesus understands. Jesus is the Friend who knows how to return us to the present moment with Him. He knows what actions you can take to breathe in His love and breathe out your worries. He is faithful to show you how, in the very moment you need Him the most. Your well-being is at the center of Jesus's heart, and He longs to lift the burden of worries off your shoulders and carry them for you, so you can take better care of yourself.

Draw close as Jesus shares a beautiful secret to quiet your worries. You can be present now with your loving Savior, right where you are.

Read: Matthew 6:25, 28-30

God will certainly take care of you. It's His promise. To quiet our worries about tomorrow, Jesus invites us to look at the flowers with Him today!

Worries are a part of life, but we can lighten the impact of worries on our hearts so they don't hold us hostage minute by minute. We can quiet our worries by looking at beautiful flowers God created for us! When we look at flowers, we relax, our mood lifts, we exhale, and we smile. Flowers are God's visual reminders that you are worth taking care of. You weren't meant to carry tomorrow's worries on top of the burdens of today.

Your heavenly Father created flowers to only last a few days, just to let you know you are worthy of such extravagant beauty and joy, even if those moments are brief. He paints each petal and delicately touches them to bloom each day, just to see your eyes brighten with delight.

Enjoying flowers is a beautiful way to stay present in the moment, to remember God's loving care for us today, so we can breathe out tomorrow's worries. He will show us the way.

Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you. - 1 Peter 5:7

Cast your cares on the Lord and He will sustain you. - Psalm 55:22

The River - Marnie Hines

Augustine wrote that God has given us two books that reveal to us what He is like: the Book of Scripture, the Bible, and the Book of Nature. These two complement one another, together speaking a single truth of what God is like and turning our hearts and minds to meditate on Him.

We go camping every summer. I just find I love the quietness. And being close to nature. We're by a really big river and able to go down and stick my chair in the water, and my feet in the water, and just let the water go by. It just feels like... seeing how the magnitude of God is just so much, much more... It is so peaceful and so grand and so humungous and so beautiful.

The river makes me think of God because of the coolness of the water... it just washes away so much garbage. If there's a place I can just lie and float in there, it just cleanses all the garbage away, it flows. It can be so gentle but so strong. The edges are soft, but that undertow is just unreal. And there's life in there too. And the sound is so beautiful, calming and peaceful... kind and strong... refreshing and caring.

*Read: Psalm 19:1; Psalm 8:3-4; 1 Corinthians 14:33a; Matthew 11:29;
Psalm 147:5; Psalm 103:8; Psalm 27:4; Psalm 23*

Walking with Tolkien by Elliot Blackwell

It is good to slow down and savour the Lord. Contemplative walks where we take our time, enjoy God's good creation, meditate on His character, and just learn to be still are good for us, mind, body, & soul.

Read: Mark 6:31, Psalm 46:10, Psalm 92

After finding a paperback copy of *Tolkien: A Celebration* at Goodwill (one of my favorite places to shop for books), I sat one day by a stream in a nearby wood, reading George Sayer's account of his friendship with J.R.R. Tolkien. He writes of being invited to go walking with C.S. Lewis and his brother Warren, and with Tolkien. Both of the Lewis brothers were dressed for a serious walk: stout walking sticks and rucksacks and boots for hiking. C.S. Lewis asked George if he could walk with Tolkien, "He's a great man, but not our sort of walker. He doesn't seem able to talk and walk at the same time. He dawdles and then stops completely when he has something interesting to say, Warchie finds this particularly irritating."

Both C.S. Lewis and his brother Warchie were serious walkers. They walked hard and fast and could go for hours. Tolkien described them as "ruthless walkers." Unlike both Lewis brothers, Tolkien loved a slow, leisurely pace. He enjoyed talking and stopping to notice whatever in nature caught his interest: trees, flowers, birds, insects, and plants. At one point, he even tells George all about the common wood avens, "This is Herb Bennet, in Latin *Herba Benedicta*. What do you think that means? The Blessed Plant. Yes, though the English form wants it to be *St. Benedict's Herb*. It is blessed because it is a protection from the devil. If it is put into a house the devil can do nothing, and if man carries it about with him, no venomous beast will come within scent of it." Or, of celandine, "Did you know that when picking celandine various combinations of *Aves* and *Paternosters* have to be said? This was one of the many cases of Christian prayers supplanting pagan ones, for in ancient times there were runes to be spoken before it was picked."

More than any other part of nature, Tolkien had a deep love for trees. Is it any wonder then that he created Ents? After Samwise Gamgee, who I believe to be the true hero of *The Lord of the Rings*, my favorite characters in this fantasy series were the Ents; in particular, Treebeard. There was something about ancient tree-like shepherds and protectors of the forest that I deeply loved. Perhaps it is because I have always loved spending time among trees. The woods behind our house was my second favorite place to spend time after the library. The word *Ent* comes from the Anglo-Saxon and means "giant." Tolkien describes Treebeard in *The Two Towers* as being:

A large Man-like, almost Troll-like, figure, at least fourteen foot high, very sturdy, with a tall head, and hardly any neck. Whether it was clad in stuff like green

and grey bark, or whether that was its hide, was difficult to say. At any rate the arms, at a short distance from the trunk, were not wrinkled, but covered with a brown smooth skin. The large feet had seven toes each. The lower part of the long face was covered with a sweeping grey beard, bushy, almost twiggy at the roots, thin and mossy at the ends. But at the moment the hobbits noted little but the eyes. These deep eyes were now surveying them, slow and solemn, but very penetrating.

I can imagine that Tolkien came up with Treebeard after spending time among the rowan trees, beech trees, and oaks that this character would so closely resemble. It's part of why I love Tolkien's writing so much: his eye for and his love of the natural world. One can feel his ache for a world in which forests are not cut down and diminished by modern industrial-age progress.

As I read about the difference between the way that C.S. Lewis walked to J.R.R. Tolkien, I could not help but see that as indicative of their personalities. Lewis more blustery and full-speed ahead in his views and opinions, while Tolkien was known as being a quiet man whose lectures were often hard to listen to because he spoke so softly. Lewis' writing is far more succinct and Tolkien's is more filled with description and diversions (who else spends so much time going into great detail the eating habits of Hobbits?). Tolkien writes like he walks. He is not in a hurry to get to his destination because he understands that it is about the journey. Is it any surprise that a man who liked to amble and explore, as opposed to simply get hurriedly from point A to point B, would write, "Not all those who wander are lost"?

I certainly identify more closely with the very private Tolkien. My older son is a Lewis-style walker: brisk and for exercise. My younger son and I are Tolkien-style walkers: we constantly stop to get a closer look at whatever in nature catches our attention. We love to look more closely at fungi or leaves or to watch small minnows in a creek or to stop and watch birds. We delight in inspecting and noticing and in talking about what we have discovered. Often we stop to take out a field guide of some sort to look up a bird or plant or tree or mushroom that we don't recognize. Sometimes we may even sing our own walking song, as Hobbits are prone to do. As Tolkien writes, "They began to hum softly, as hobbits have a way of doing as they walk along, especially when they are drawing near to home at night. With most Hobbits it is a supper-song or a bed-song; but these hobbits hummed a walking-song (though not, of course, without any mention of supper and bed)."

Frodo, Sam, and Pippin sing:

*Upon the hearth the fire is red,
Beneath the roof there is a bed;
But not yet weary are our feet,*

*Still round the corner we may meet
A sudden tree or standing stone
That none have seen but we alone.*

*Tree and flower and leaf and grass,
Let them pass! Let them pass!
Hill and water under sky,
Pass them by! Pass them by!*

*Still round the corner there may wait
A new road or a secret gate,
And though we pass them by today,
Tomorrow we may come this way
And take the hidden paths that run
Towards the Moon or to the Sun.*

*Apple, thorn, and nut and sloe,
Let them go! Let them go!
Sand and stone and pool and dell,
Fare you well! Fare you well!*

*Home is behind, the world ahead,
And there are many paths to tread
Through shadows to the edge of night,
Until the stars are all alight.
Then world behind and home ahead,
We'll wander back to home and bed.*

*Mist and twilight, cloud and shade,
Away shall fade! Away shall fade!
Fire and lamp, and meat and bread,
And then to bed! And then to bed!*

Is it any wonder that Tolkien is one of my favorite authors to carry along with me when I go on walks? I love to keep company with *The Hobbit* or any one of *The Lord of the Rings*. Certainly, I would have adored going on walks with Tolkien the man. I would have loved nothing more than to stop and listen to him explain why the main pass over the hills is called Wyche by explaining the various meanings of the word *Wye* or how *Malvern* is a corruption of two Welsh words “*moel* meaning bear, and *vern* derived from *bryn* or *fryn* meaning hill.” I would be fascinated in what he had to say and would have no problem with his genial and relaxed way of walking. I wish the world were filled with more Tolkienesque walkers: those who find the journey to be the point, who are not hurried in their desire to get to the destination but delight in discovering what the path and off the beaten path has to offer.

Pulling Weeds by Krista Konyk

Weeds Choke, Forgiveness Heals

"Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful." Matthew 13:7& 22

I was so angry I could have punched him in the face! Every time I heard his name or voice I was angry! This is how I felt about my ex-husband.

I had allowed the roots of bitterness, anger, hatred, hurt, sorrow, and disdain take root in my heart.

My divorce was two-sided. Yes, there were a lot of things that happened for me to draw the line and cut things off, not only for my mental well-being, but also for my children's physical and mental well-being. I had given a chance, but that wore out. My children were suffering. The interesting thing is that we are both Christians, so why did our marriage fail and why was I in the state I was in?

I had allowed seeds to take root in my life. The more I ignored them and tried to top the heads, the deeper the roots got. It got to the point where my body was physically hurting. Migraines, body aches, weight gain, and so much more. But even worse, it drew a wedge between God and I. I still spent time with Him, but it didn't "feel" good enough. He had been telling me for quite some time to write a letter to my ex-husband and ask for forgiveness. Being the stubborn person that I can be, I kept putting it off. The VOICE of God kept getting stronger and stronger, till one day while I was visiting my parents and talking to a friend, who told me to "just do it." Well, I didn't, I waited till the next morning, and told my dad about the previous day's conversation. He told me to "just do it," my friend has lots of wisdom and I should listen to her. So, I did.

I sat down and wrote down everything that was inside of me. All the anger, bitterness, rage, spite, EVERYTHING! If my mum read that letter she would have washed my mouth out with soap. I completely emptied my heart in the letter, Ending it with asking for and releasing *forgiveness*. 5 pages later I put my pen down and bawled. I asked mum why, and she said that Jesus was working in me. I called my friend to see if I should mail it or burn it. Together, we held that letter in my hand, she prayed over me and I burnt the letter in the red coals of the dying fire.

As she prayed over me, I had a vision of soil with plants and roots. And it was like God was telling me, "If you just pluck the heads off the roots still grow deeper and stronger with off shoots. But, if you pull the weeds and just leave them they can re-root themselves. But, if you burn them, they can't take root." There are some plants that the only way to destroy them is to burn the soil. After the process, I had an unexplainable peace flood through me. I can say my ex-husband's name or talk about him or hear his voice now and not want to punch him out. Thank You, Holy Spirit, for this amazing Transformation!

Oh, how God wants to refine us with the Refiners Fire! Does it hurt? Uh, yes! But is it worth it? DEFINITELY!!

Allow the Holy Spirit to do some weed pulling in your life. Ask the greatest Gardner ever to show you the areas in your heart and life that need to be pulled and burned. Anne Graham Lotz has an amazing section in her book "The Daniel Prayer" where she has a list of sins for a confession practice. There are 21 of them. What she was challenged to do, and what she challenged us her readers to do, is to go through the list and write the instances we committed that sin as it came to mind. Because our sins are committed one at a time, they must be reviewed and repented of one by one, she writes. Consider each of the sins on the list and then go back and reread the list, writing down any other sins that come to mind. When the exercise is done, do it a third time.

The repetition lets Jesus work inside us the way we need.

If we don't pull the roots, other roots will grow into other harmful "plants" in our lives. The effects on our lives can be physically harmful. It has been scientifically proven that holding on to anger can cause a heart attack. Deep grief can cause one to die of a broken heart. I have personally heard of and seen the latter. Holding onto these deep emotions tears us away from God and the life and joy He has for us. Allowing the Gardener of our souls to gently yet firmly pull the weeds of our heart will allow amazing lush, green, fruitful growth to be produced. It isn't something that happens overnight, but bit by bit, weed by weed, layer by layer He will transform us into something beautiful that others (even ourselves) will want to be around.

"Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful." Matthew 13:7& 22

Psalms 66:18 (NIV)

"If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened."

► Holding onto sin silently can block our prayers and intimacy with God.

Hebrews 3:12-13 (NLT)

"Be careful... that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God... so that none of you will be deceived by sin and hardened against God."

► Sin deceives us and slowly hardens our hearts.

Hebrews 12:15 (NIV)


"See to it... that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many."

► Bitterness doesn't stay small—it spreads and destroys.

James 3:14-16 (NIV)

"If you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts... such 'wisdom' is earthly, unspiritual, demonic."


► Inner toxic attitudes open doors to harmful spiritual influence.

 Devotional Questions: Pulling Weeds in Our Lives


Matthew 13:24-30

"Let both grow together until the harvest..." (v.30)


1. What weeds have been growing unnoticed in the garden of my heart?

 *What thoughts, habits, or influences have subtly crept in that choke out God's truth in my life?*


2. What does the Holy Spirit keep bringing to my attention, even if I've tried to ignore it?

 *Is there something I've been brushing off that God is gently inviting me to confront and remove?*


3. Have I grown comfortable with compromise in any area of my life?

 *What do I tolerate that I know doesn't belong in the soil of my soul?*

4. What fruit is missing in my life that might signal the presence of spiritual weeds?

 *Am I lacking love, joy, peace, patience, or self-control—and why?*

5. Am I trying to do the Holy Spirit's work by uprooting people instead of problems?

 *How can I trust God with the timing of growth and the process of separating good from evil?*


6. What influences (media, relationships, habits) are sowing weeds into my life?

 *What seeds am I allowing to be planted through my daily choices and attention?*


7. Is there a root of bitterness, fear, or pride that I've left untended?

 *Am I willing to let the Lord dig deep to remove it—even if it's painful or humbling?*


8. What does healthy spiritual soil look like in this season of my life?

 *What would a weed-free garden look and feel like for me—and how can I cooperate with God in tending it?*

9. Do I believe that God is patient with my process of growth and healing?

 *How can I embrace grace while also committing to transformation?*

10. Where is God calling me to sow good seed, despite the presence of weeds?

 *What good habits, thoughts, and relationships is the Holy Spirit urging me to nurture right now?*

Buttercups - Bethany Scratch

I don't remember exactly how old I was when I first saw buttercups. I know they do not grow in the Southern Alberta prairies where I grew up, so it was probably on a camping trip at Elkwater during yearly Girl Guide camps. They have always seemed like such happy flowers to me. So are dandelions - there was always about one week, every spring, when the dandelions covered the grass at the farm before Dad had a chance to spray them... and I loved that week. Everything seemed happier with the bright yellow flowers decorating the grass.

'I love buttercups. They're always so happy,' was my usual attempt at sharing my joy with someone.

'They're a weed,' they would say, with varying levels of frustration and disgust. 'They're invasive. They're such a pain to get out of the lawn,' was the predictable reply. No one wanted buttercups in their space. My Mom couldn't stand them in her yard in Abbotsford.

'They're so pretty though,' is all I would reply, and then hush my face. Never wanting to push too hard and cause a disagreement. They are just plants. This shouldn't be a big deal.

But inside, my heart was always sad for the cheerful, pretty little buttercups, unfairly designated as weeds just because the wildflowers didn't follow arbitrary rules about lawn composition. And for a little girl who loved flowers, but grew up in the aforementioned semi-desert prairies where we had like three wildflowers that grew sporadically at best, flourishing buttercups that covered meadows seemed magical. They gave me joy. I liked them. Wasn't that enough to justify their existence as part of God's *good* creation, that they could bring at least some people some measure of joy?

But the buttercups were the wrong plant in the wrong place at the wrong time, and therefore offensive. Undesirable. Unacceptable. Unlovable.

Just a weed.

Every time I have moved, God has put me in a place where I could heal, grow, discover, mature, and thrive at least a little bit more. Usually a lot more, which is why I've learned to a) trust God when it's time to move, and b) look for the growth opportunity and lean in. So when Vienna and I moved to The Abode (as Vienna has designated it) at Kelly's, I was looking for how God would convict me and make space for me to process, heal, and grow deeper in Him.

For the first time, this place also comes with a small backyard that we are actually responsible for taking care of, and when I got busy (shocker) this spring, it got fairly overgrown. I eventually got my new reel mower together and began the

process of mowing down the patches of grass, dandelions, and many, many leafy plants, layer by layer. Got busy again, mentally berated myself for a solid week to make time for the yard.

Life interrupted like it was a conspiracy.

I finally got back into the yard with my reel mower, dead set on finishing getting the overgrowth fully down, throwing down the clover seed (clover lawns are low maintenance, we are transitioning), and then getting on to the next project.

And I was greeted by hundreds of soft yellow buttercups.

The leafy plants I was so diligently mowing down earlier? All buttercups. Our own mini-meadow.

I am learning that God doesn't just give us growth opportunities, tasks, lessons, tests and trials, work, projects, and opportunities to change (although these are all good things) for our sanctification. While God is very interested in us maturing and becoming like Christ, He also gives us joy. Simply because, He is the source of Joy and He loves making His children happy. And learning to receive joy from God and drink deep from the Source... this too is part of becoming like Jesus.

So I stood there with my reel mower and *cried*. Because my God gave me buttercups.

I did not plant them. I did not tend to them. Heck, they were the easiest part of the backyard to mow down. I didn't even *recognise them*. I didn't do a darn thing to earn them. I never would have even thought to ask for them.

But God knew. And He gave me buttercups. Without me even having to do so much as *ask for them*. Abba just gave them to me.

In Psalm 37:3-5 David writes, "Trust in the Lord and do good. Then you will live safely in the land and prosper. Take delight in the Lord, and He will give you your heart's desires. Commit everything you do to the Lord. Trust Him, and He will help you."

Over the last few years, God has been teaching me to walk His path of peace, to learn to trust in Him for safety and stability.

I'm still struggling with the last part - we are a work in progress - learning to commit everything I do to the Lord, trusting Him to help me... and then actually *receiving* that help. I am still instinctively hyper-independent, have a hard time loosening my grip, and a harder time even *remembering to ask for God's help*.

But apparently God is focused on the middle verse right now, teaching me to delight in Him and trust Him with the desires of my heart, not merely ignore them or dismiss them as inherently bad and therefore immaterial to existence. For the

decade I've gotten to be at Brookwood, God has taught me about my own temperament, personality, and brain and how to commune with Him in ways that actually fit how He's created me. He's revealed Himself to me as my heavenly Father in ways that I desperately needed. The Holy Spirit has led me to spiritual practices that let me connect with Him and cooperate with His will and work, as He 'meets the deep needs of my soul,' as Kim Blackaby always says. Needs that I didn't even realise I had, that I didn't understand. But God knew. Desires that reach far, far deeper into me, into the core of my human nature. But God knew that too.

I did not expect God to notice or remember my heart's desires about little things like buttercups (or a kitchen with white cabinets, or dogs on an acreage, or friends who actually like tea and roadtrips). I certainly never expected Him to give them to me.

But God knows my heart, right down to the forgotten parts I learned to abandon long ago. I never would have even considered putting buttercups in our backyard for the sheer joy of it; but we have a patch of them that are living their best life out there now.

And I love them. They incline my heart toward the Father in gratitude every time I see them, reminding me the Father *loves* giving good gifts to His children (Matt. 7:11). They make me feel loved. They make me feel seen. They remind me that God made me, and He *likes* me. That even if I never find a human being with whom I can share my joy of buttercups, my Father gave me a whole bunch of them simply because He knew they gave me joy. What my heart wanted was enough of a reason.

I ask God for what I want even less than I ask for what I need. But the last few years, God keeps surprising me with desires that I'd long since dismissed as little and unimportant in the grand scheme of things, forgotten because they seemed unworthy, silly, or immature to others, an illegitimate desire for a grown-up. I have become far more accustomed to telling my heart 'no' by default, often thinking my desires (and needs) don't matter, and I'm simply not meant for joy. Others, sure. But not me. And I focus on growing up, and forget about things like meadows filled with buttercups.

But our God is good.

He never forgets.

He renovates our hearts and transforms our desires to reflect His, because He knows what will make us blessed, peace-filled, joyful, lovely humans.

And He is gentle with us, teaching us to receive good gifts from our heavenly Father who loves us, simply because He is love and we are His beloved.

And then *He gives us what we have been longing for.*

Somehow I forgot that part. So caught up in keeping my head down, locking in, getting the work done, I forgot that the God who invites us to delight in Him also *gives us the desires of our hearts.* And our souls need to look for those blessings because joy is a spiritual need, and it inclines our hearts to God in worship and gratitude and yet more *delight.*

When I was debating moving this last time, because I struggled to accept that maybe God was okay with my reasons for moving not being motivated by a work opportunity, or ministry opportunity, or financial concerns, or for the sake of everyone else... and that the simple fact that I had a lot of reasons *I wanted* to move there was enough for God to be on board, Pastor Pam wrote to me one simple encouragement:

Just imagine how over time your desires have transformed into God's desires.'

In Psalm 37:4, David writes, "Take delight in the Lord, and He will give you your heart's desires."

Imagine that. That as we learn to delight in the Lord, He will give us our heart's desires. That we are invited to *trust Him*, as the good and wise God who not only wants to bless us, wants to give us the desires of hearts, but is capable, willing, and eager to make our desires *good* so He can give us good gifts. So He can meet the deep needs of our souls, that He Himself created. So He can love every bit of us.

And then He follows through and blesses the daylights out of us.

We are utterly safe and utterly loved with our God.

Our God is loving (1 John 4)

Our God is good (Psalm 34)

Our God is kind (Isaiah 63:7, 30:8, 54:7-10, Psalm 86:5)

Our God is gentle (1 Kings 19:11-12, Isaiah 42:3, Romans 2:4, Hosea 11:1-4)

Our God is with us (Psalm 139:7-10, James 4:8, John 14:23, Hebrews 13:5)

And there are buttercups in my backyard.

Weeds with Roots - Renée Netterfield

Who can resist the joy of pulling a weed in an otherwise delightful garden? Or, if you visit my garden you will see those pesky weeds exploding all around my lovely roses and hydrangeas. The temptation to just give a good yank is a challenge to resist but time has shown the danger of breaking off the offending weeds and ignoring the aggressive roots that seem to go deeper and get stronger when broken. One offensive weed can produce another dozen plants popping up while we're peacefully sleeping in the night.

A lovely garden can hide a tangle of weeds hidden under the soil, but they don't hide for long and will soon spoil the delight if left unmanaged.

Hebrews 12:15 says: "See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many".

We may think we've tucked that pesky weed out of sight and have managed to eliminate the outward signs of our pain or resentment. But if the root remains, it will grow. We may think we can hide it in a big smile, kind words and generous actions. We may think we've "let it go" which is so often the catch phrase for "stuffed it deep", but it will grow unless we deal with it before the Lord. We all cherish God's forgiveness and rely on His love when we've failed. But unless we are able to present our own bitterness to Him, to lay our grief before the cross and trust Him to take care of it, it will grow and others will feel the sting. Even as you read this someone or something may flit through your mind and you may be tempted to shrug and say "that's over". But if it's still there, then God is asking you to surrender it all to Him. Right Now.

He's asking us to trust Him with the outcome of our pain or disappointment. He wants us to trust Him to "do the right thing" with something that was so very wrong. His precious gift to us is to be free from carrying someone else's sin. To be free from embracing pain that had roots from years ago. Sometimes reconciliation is not possible. But forgiveness is ALWAYS possible.

Not long ago I had a mental picture of reaching the gates of heaven. There before me was my precious Savior with His arms outstretched to welcome me into His presence. But first I found I had to stop and unload a terrible bag load of hurts and unforgiveness before I was able to rush into those welcoming arms of love. My heart cries out to the Lord, "Create in me a clean heart. And renew a right spirit within me." Do I trust Him with my pain? Do I trust His love to be greater than my disappointments or rejections? Am I willing for Him to dig out those painful roots and set me free to "Forgive Every One All the Time"? Oh yes. If He is able to forgive me, He is able to manage my pain as well. To release a root of bitterness

into the care of our Lord and Savior can feel as if we're having a piece of us ripped out of our heart. It can feel as if we're accepting the wrong done to us and giving freedom to the one who did it. And it's all true. The question is, can we trust God to take over and do the right thing with something that was so very wrong?

Years ago we used to sing:

All to Jesus I surrender,

all to Him I freely give.

I will ever love and trust Him,

in His presence daily live.

I surrender all,

I surrender all

All to Jesus, I surrender

I surrender all.

Wildflowers from Breathe by Bonnie Gray

I've always wanted to go to the desert and see the wildflowers bloom.

I read in an article that once a year wildflowers bloom in the desert. So one year for spring break, I convinced Eric and our two boys to go climb rocks in Joshua Tree National Park. I sealed the deal by saying, "We'll even go on a jeep tour!" We packed our bags and drove down to Palm Springs from the Silicon Valley Bay Areas for the first time.

But when I called to book the jeep tour, the company told me no one knew exactly when flowers bloom in the desert. "We only know they bloom sometime between March and May," they said.

I learned that depending on the conditions of the land and weather, the timing varies every year. Still, I booked the trip, praying God would allow us to see wildflowers.

As my family and I zoomed out into the desert later that week, nothing but dirt, rocks, and shrubs dotted the landscape. I felt so let down as our open-air jeep jostled us across the desert plains.

"I thought we were going to see wildflowers," my boys said, looking around like bright-eyed prairie dogs.

I shrugged. "Yeah, I guess not," I shouted above the squeaky jeep ride.

To my surprise, just 30 minutes later, our guide stopped by the roadside and walked us over to some plants. "Wildflowers bloom here because they tell us

something important is up ahead," he said, with a sparkle in his eyes underneath his sun hat.

He pointed up ahead to a cluster of palm trees in the distance. An oasis! Streams were running underneath the ground we stood on, and the wild flower plants were drawing water from deep within the desert.

I didn't know flower could blossom like that in the desert because nothing along the way told me anything beautiful could emerge from dry wilderness. Yet underneath the barren desert floor where I could not see, life-giving water was flowing.

Are you standing in a wilderness of your own - in a desert of stress where peace and joy look just beyond reach? Do you feel overwhelmed, surrounded by questions and problems? Are you losing hope that beauty will show up along the way?

Stress can make us feel overwhelmed, especially when we don't even realize we are depleted until we suddenly hit the wall. You're going to be okay. Because no matter how dry or barren your life feels right now, it's never too late to find joy. God's love and peace is an oasis we can run to, return to, and be refilled by, no matter how hopeless things appear.

As I stood in the middle of an oasis of lush palm trees, marveling at the pool of water flowing out of the ground, I felt an overwhelming peace. My heart was refreshed with joy as I began recalling Scriptures that flowed out life-giving ruth from a place of barren hope.

Nothing will be impossible with God. - Luke 1:37

The Lord will always guide you; He will satisfy you in a sun-scorched land and strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. - Isaiah 58:11

Joy will blossom again in you because God makes beautiful things come alive in you. You are His beloved child, and He knows just what you need.

If You Care for Me by Luci Shaw from *Polishing the Petoskey Stone*

If you care for me
speak to me without words
in a spiral of starlings
thrown into a bank of wind, scarves
of an invisible dancer making the sky a stage

Make a negligent gesture like
the drop of chestnut at my feet
the glossy nucula bounding out of its spiky casing
rolling to me, a gift of round
and brown as a chocolate cream

Caress me with a curtain of dew
on my moonlit skylight, or boulders
shining under their clear skin
of rain. In the rock garden
a crimson cosmos articulates
its bright, small world. Speak
to my eyes in syllables of light
and color, if you care for me

Remind me about space as
I watch the finches
peck at the wind in the balsams. The doe
cleaves the air current over
the ribbon of creek. The great
blue heron elbows its way up
through gaps wild with branches
and you are opening
for me, too, a new passage
between the trees

By the way you breathe the dead leaves
into a small whirlwind of fire
show me, if you care for me, how you can
lift me from the dust,
light me like tinder

Read: 1 John 4:16, 19; Psalm 89:2

From Mary Kassian, In My Father's House: "Luci Shaw's poem demonstrates how we can observe God's love for us in the very things that we regard as ordinary or insignificant. We can be wise and see the love of God in these things, or we can totally miss the message. Why do you suppose it is often so difficult for people to accept the fact that God the Father loves them? And how about you? Do you find it difficult to accept the fact that God the Father loves you? In 2 Thessalonians 3:5 the apostle Paul prays, "May the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God." To *direct* means "to guide straight toward." Take a moment to pray this for yourself. Pray that the Lord will direct your heart into the love of God so that you may know and believe the love that the Father has for you."

Wicked Weeds from Mended by Angie Smith

Read: Romans 8:12-15

It was hotter than it should have been for that day as my daughter and I were evaluating the state of our lawn. We walked hand in hand, barefoot in the tall grass, and I bent down to pull up a weed. Ellie looked at me with an expression of outrage that belied her age.

"Mommy, why you pull that up?"

"Because it's a weed, honey."

My fingers reached over and over again into the warm earth as my thoughts drifted elsewhere. I thought about what I was going to make for dinner, what time I needed to wake up the baby, where my lost care keys could have gone, and many other seemingly important questions. I felt a tug at the back of my shirt and shifted my focus.

"Hi, Ellie. What do you need, honey?"

"What's a weed?" The curious blue eyes were searching me, waiting for an answer that would clarify why Mommy was tearing up the yard that Daddy had been working so hard on that summer.

"Oh, baby, a weed is not a good thing. It is going to try and kill all of our grass." I tried to read Ellie's face to see if this explanation satisfied her. I imagined it would. At the tender age of three and a half, she had already become my rule-enforcer, my child of justice, the one who always pointed out the color of upcoming

traffic lights as we drove and corrected children on the playground for using "potty talk."

Her eyes widened and she crouched down, eye to eye with the killer weeds. An air of righteousness overtook her as she said in her sternest voice, "Oh dear. You are trying to kill grass. Naughty, naughty." Ellie tipped her chin back to look at me, the sun flooding her face, and she smiled the smile that meant "I took care of it."

I patted her fiery red head. "Thanks, Ellie. Now run along and play." I watched as she dusted the dirt cautiously from her knees and shifted her hair out of her face. As she started walking toward her twin sister, she announced, "Abby, those weeds are trying to kill something. We gotta get 'em!"

Abby, more similar to Ellie in looks than moral reasoning, turned briefly and gave a supportive horrified look to show Ellie she had heard the news. Then she went back to drinking water from the sprinkler while doing what looked to be a choreographed frenzy of joy.

The next day, Ellie approached me while I was sitting in the yard watching the sun set in the trees behind our house. My heart was heavy with the gravity of daily life, and as she always did, Ellie sensed that something was not right.

"Mommy, why you feeling that?" Ellie's choice of words took me off guard; I myself was unable to identify the "that" in what I was feeling.

Her tiny, sweaty hand ran along my arm, and I looked into a deep place in her, replying gently, "Today Mommy is feeling kind of down. It's all right; Mommy is okay. Just thinking about things."

I didn't want Ellie to feel my burden, so instead of letting my thoughts get the better of me, I began to tickle her and roll her around in the hot grass. A look of shock came over her, and I pulled my arms back, trying to imagine what could have upset her.

"Baby, are you okay? Did Mommy hurt you?" Ellie's eyes were looking over my head, and I tried to follow her gaze.

"No. I think I see a wicked. I gonna get it." Hands on hips, she walked a few steps from where we were, her tiny sneakers carving a path of determination. She lowered her body deliberately and pointed at a weed that was towering over the grass.

"Look." She turned to see what effect her discovery would have on me. Assured that I had seen the problem, she clarified her concern. "Is that a wicked or a grass?"

Where she heard the word *wicked* in reference to a weed, I don't know, but I do know that there was great importance in the elimination of the correct green species in our yard. God forbid she should pull up a piece of healthy grass!

What a funny little girl, I thought, and then I realized something. To the three-year-old eye, and maybe even to the thirty-year-old eye, weeds and grass look very similar. Same color, same feeling, same texture. In fact, I realized that the "wicked" and the grass were only discernibly different to me because I had seen them for enough years to know the difference. I looked down into red cheeks and pursed lips.

"That's a weed." Ellie gave a nod of supportive confirmation and turned toward the little green enemy.

"Hmm. You tryin' to kill something?" she interrogated the weed, either out of a sense of power over it or a sense of unease about what was to come next. Ellie looked at me one more time, waiting for me to tell her, as I do several times each day, that this was not a good choice. My silence must have been translated as permission, and she reached, gently, to touch the weed. But instead of pulling the whole thing out, she touched the tiny leaves of the "wicked" and pulled it just enough to remove a sliver. She discarded it quickly and reached in for more. I watched as she did this several times, not at all put out by the fact that she appeared to be doing very little to stop the killer weeds that were threatening our grass as we knew it.

It was at this moment, as I sat beside her in the grass, that I realized God was teaching me more than proper lawn care. I thought about how many times, even in a day, I reach to pull the "wicked" one leaf at a time, and all the while it is growing bigger and stronger all around me. I am seasoned enough in my walk to identify the weeds in my life, and I am much too tentative when it comes to removing them.

I sat and stared at my Ellie, so much like her mommy in so many ways, as she delicately plucked leaf from leaf. I wanted her to learn more from the moment, as I had, and so I put my fingers around hers, noticing that we both had dirt under our fingernails. I moved her hands away and took firm grip on the base of the weed.

"Here, let me show you." I jiggled it as I went to make sure the root came up with the weed. Side to side, delicately at first, and then when I sensed it would come up in one whole piece, I tugged it out in one quick motion.

Ellie marveled at the long roots dangling down and the gap left in our ground.

"See how Mommy got the whole thing? You want me to help you learn?" Ellie nodded and I pointed to another weed a few feet away. She rose confidently and approached the "wicked" with a new realization: *I know your secret.*

We spent the next hour walking side by side, saying very little, rejoicing in the holes that were cropping up all over Daddy's lawn. For both of us, there was a sense that they were a small price to pay for the greater good.

We both got better as we went along, learning the way different weeds come up out of the dirt. Some are long and skinny, and those just take one good pull. Others are leafy and the roots are stubborn. Sometimes you have to dig all around the weed and tug gently. We became a great team.


As the waning sun looked down on us that Thursday night, I learned something about the boldness we should claim in approaching our sin. We kneel, we face it eye to eye, we clarify that it is not of our Lord, and then, in utter confidence, we grasp it by its strongest point and destroy it. We don't have to do it alone, and we don't have to do it in fear.

We are tended to by the great garden Himself, whose deepest longings are met as we walk in the joy of gaping holes that He can pour Himself into and raise life anew.

I pray that you learn to be bold with the sins you face in your life, not as one who fears the gardening, but as one whose desire is to be blameless and pure as you sense the Father beckoning you to rid your life of weeds (Philippians 2:15).

mending

- I would like to plead a lack of knowledge and say that most of the time I don't really know the difference between the wicked weeds and the good grass, but the truth is, I often do. Whether or not I protect the weeds isn't a matter of just recognizing the weed for what it is, but possessing the conviction to grab hold of the roots and yank like my life depends on it. I sit captivated as a friend teases someone, and I laugh instead of expressing disapproval. I listen to gossip and perhaps even pass it along. I complain bitterly about my husband to a friend and say that I just needed to "vent." I'm guessing that you probably struggle with some of these same things as well as the many other examples I didn't mention.
- I know when I am partaking of (or initiating) things that aren't God's best, but it sure is easy to let it slide. I say I want to be holy, blameless, and beyond reproach, but often my actions disagree. We see gossip as social and rebellion as "edgy." We ignore the convictions that rise up throughout our days because we don't want to be the one to break up the party. Today - now, in fact, I want you to pray that God will reveal an area in your life where you have to let sin slide. It might be in your marriage, your thought life, or even in the way you carry yourself in your Bible study group. Maybe it's an attitude of pride, a looseness in your speech, or a blatant sin act that you are keeping a secret.



Pray that the Lord will be very specific in pointing out the places where you need to remove sin. It's hard to bet he one who starts digging around in the garden, but I assure you the harvest is worth the effort. Even if you don't feel comfortable going into specifics, it's important to share this with someone else who can help to hold you to a higher standard. When you start pulling up those weeds, you can be sure Satan has more waiting underneath to tempt you. Don't give up. Keep attacking those areas and remembering the potential that lies on the other side. God is worthy of our efforts to make it beautiful here in the garden He has given us.

Part II: Cultivate Eden

Then God said, “Let us make human beings in Our image, to be like Us. They will reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the wild animals on the earth, and the small animals that scurry along the ground.”

So God created human beings in His own image.

*In the image of God He created them;
male and female He created them.*

Then God blessed them and said, “Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it. Reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and all the animals that scurry along the ground.”

Then God said, “Look! I have given you every seed-bearing plant throughout the earth and all the fruit trees for your food. And I have given every green plant as food for all the wild animals, the birds in the sky, and the small animals that scurry along the ground—everything that has life.” And that is what happened.

*Then God looked over all He had made, and He saw that it was very good!
And evening passed and morning came, marking the sixth day.*

- Genesis 1:26-31

God Works & Rests from *Garden City* by John Mark Comer

The next several entries are all from Garden City by John Mark Comer. They are meant to be read in order, as they will build upon each other (and, honestly, get the book. It's stellar Bible study. Okay, onward and upward!)

Read: Genesis 1-2

The first story in the Scriptures starts with God working and ends with Him resting.

The opening line of the Bible is, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." The phrase "the heavens and the earth" is a Hebrew idiom, very similar to our saying, "from top to bottom." It's a way of saying *everything*.

But at first this new world is "formless and empty." In the original language it's this poetic phrase - *tohu wabohu*. There's all sorts of controversy about how to best translate *tohu wabohu* into English, but a growing number of scholars vote for "barren and uninhabited." So, there's a world, but it's an alien wasteland.

So for six "days" God is hard at work, forming and filling the earth up with life. And at the end of the week we read, "God saw all that He had made, and it was very good." This is God sitting back after a long, hard week's work, sinking into His chair, and thinking to Himself, Not bad. It's God drawing joy from His labor. That sense of satisfaction and fulfillment you get when you're good at what you do and you love it.

Then we read, "By the seventh day God had finished the work He had been doing; so on the seventh day He rested from all His work." Rest here doesn't mean God was tired or worn down. It's an act of delight. God is enjoying the fruit of His labor.

And in between the opening line and the closing paragraph, the narrative is filled with metaphor after metaphor for who God is and what God is like.

God is an artist, a designer, a creative... He's an engineer, a builder... An ecologist, a zoologist, an expert in horticulture... A musician, a poet... A king, a shepherd...

But above all, He's a worker, and vigorous one at that.

Now, the Scriptures weren't written into a vacuum, they were written into time and space. We don't know exactly where or when *Genesis* was written, but for sure in the ancient Near East, a long, *long* time ago.

Most of the other creation myths from around this time have the same basic idea: The gods are tired and worn out. Work is thought of as a burden. It's *beneath* the gods. And so humanity is created as cheap slave labor - to do the work of the

gods for them. To give them food and drink from sacrifices at the temple. That way the gods can sit back and "be at ease."

Read over against the other creation myths of the day, *Genesis* is shocking. This God - the one, true Creator God - is nothing like these other gods. He doesn't hate work; in fact, He seems to really enjoy it. And instead of creating humanity to offload all His work because it's beneath Him, the story opens with God Himself working to create a world *for* humanity, a place for us to experience and enjoy His presence. Humanity isn't created as cheap slave labor to do His bidding, but rather as His co-creators, His partners.

Yes, you heard me right. We are God's partners.

The language that's used in *Genesis* is the "image of God."

God said, "Let Us make mankind in Our image, in Our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish of the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

*So God created mankind in His own image,
in the image of God He created them:
male and female He created them.*

We hear this language all the time, but what does it actually mean? To be made in the image of God?

The word *image* is *selem* in Hebrew, and it can be translated "idol" or "statue." An idol is a visible representation of an invisible being. A statue was put in the temple of every god in the ancient world so the worshiper could see what that god was like.

We are God's statues. His *selem*.

We were put on earth - because the entire cosmos is *this* God's temple - to make visible the invisible God. To show the world what God is like. We are the Creator's representatives to His creation.

But that's just the beginning, there's more...

The Image of God from *Garden City* by John Mark Comer

Read: 1 Corinthians 15:21, 45; Romans 5:14, 5:17; Revelation 1:5, 19:16;
Mark 16:19

The phrase *selem elohim*, meaning "image of god," was used all over the ancient Near East, but not just for anybody - for the king.

For example, Pharaoh was called Amon-Re, or image of Re, after Re, the sun god in the Egyptian pantheon. But it wasn't just an Egyptian thing. All over ancient Mesopotamia, the king was called the image of god. He was seen by the people as quasi-divine, as the god's representative, acting on his behalf, ruling in his place. And his relationship to the god was unique. He knew the divine in a way nobody else could ever hope to. The king was his or her high priest - meditating blessing to the kingdom.

The theology of the image of God in *Genesis* was, *and still is*, subversive and stunning. It claims that *all* human beings - not just those of royal blood, not just the oligarchy of society, not just white men - *all* of us are made in the image of God.

This is the democratizing of humanity. We are all kings and queens, and the entire earth is our kingdom.

That's why the very next sentence says, "So that they may *rule*." The seamless connection between "image" and "rule" is explicit in the text.

The word *rule* is *radah* in Hebrew. It can be translated "reign" or "have dominion." It's king language. One Hebrew scholar translated it as "to actively partner with God in taking the world somewhere."

The imagery of humanity's relationship to God is *not* of puppets on a string, with God up in heaven playing around. Rather, it's of partners, God's representatives on earth, kings and queens, ruling over His world.

Think about it: God could have made humans from the dust, like He did with Adam, but instead He chose to work through marriage and family. He could have made food fall from the sky, like He did with manna in the exodus, but instead He chose to work through farming and agriculture and trade. He could have put Adam and Eve into a city, like He's going to do in the New Jerusalem, but instead He chose to put the proto-humans in the Garden and give them a shot at starting a civilization from scratch.

Why? Because *God is looking for partners*.

And that's a dangerous game for God to play.

In the very next paragraph humans are commanded to "fill the earth and subdue it." This word *subdue* is intriguing. In Hebrew it's *kabash*, where we get the

saying, "Put the kibosh on it!" (Come on, that's cool.) It can mean to exploit or enslave or abuse or even to rape. But it can also mean to tame something that's wild, to bring order out of chaos, to bring harmony out of discord. Once again, it's king and queen language.

There are good kings, and there are bad kings. There are good monarchs, under whose rule a kingdom thrives - civilization grows and expands, the earth flourishes. And there are evil tyrants, whose reigns are marked by oppression and injustice - dehumanizing people and stripping bare the soil of the earth. It all depends on what kind of ruler you have.

So we humans are a mixed bag. We have a great capacity - more than we know - to rule in a way that is life-giving for the people around us and the place we call home, *or* to rule in such a way that we exploit the earth itself and rob people of an environment where they can thrive.

This was God's risk. His venture. His experiment.

And this is why Jesus came as a *human*. Think about how weird that is. For millennia God had come in an audible voice or in a cloud on a mountain or a burning bush or even as a whisper in a cave, but this is a startling twist in God's MO. This time around, He comes as a *human*.

Why?

Because the Creator still hadn't given up on His dream for Adam...

The writer Paul does this ingenious connect-the-dots between Adam and Jesus. It's easy to miss, even though Paul does it in a couple of places. In 1 Corinthians 16 he calls Jesus "the last Adam." In Romans 5, he calls Adam the "advance prototype of the one who would come." Meaning Adam, the first human, was entrusted with the ruling of the world, but he was just a signpost pointing forward to "the last Adam," the one true human who would come and rule the world forever, Jesus.

Which makes Paul's next line all the more interesting: "For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ!"

This is an unexpected twist. Paul's basic idea is that because of Adam's disobedience, we all die, but because of Jesus' obedience, we all live. But in this statement, he takes it to the next level. Not only do we live, but we "reign in life."

"Reign" is king language. It's Genesis language. "Reign" is what we were supposed to do all along, before Adam mucked it all up.

God's original intent was always for a human being to rule over the world.

Adam had the first crack at it, and he failed. If you know the story of the Bible, you know that next God called Abraham and his family to take another shot, but tragically, they failed too. What is the Old Testament but the story of one ruler after another, trying to do what Adam was supposed to do — rule over the earth in a life-giving way — but failing, often miserably? And it's not just *them*, it's *us*. I've failed. So have you.

But where Adam and Abraham and Israel and you and I all failed, Jesus didn't. He did what Adam was supposed to do but couldn't. What Israel was supposed to do but couldn't. What we were supposed to do but couldn't.

That's why immediately after His resurrection He's called "King of Kings" and "Lord of Lords" and "the ruler of the kings of the earth." Even the closing line in the gospel about how Jesus "was taken up into heaven and He sat at the right hand of God" isn't a statement about Jesus' absence from the world, as much as His presence.

What's He doing at the "right hand of God"?

Ruling over the earth.

And what's the first thing Jesus does with His rule?

He shares it with us.

Why? *Because from the beginning of the story God has been looking for partners.*

Is this starting to come full circle for you?

This is what we were made for.

Kings & Queens from *Garden City* by John Mark Comer

Read: Genesis 1-2:2

All this talk about kings and queens is fine, but we don't live in the ancient Near East. And most of us aren't royalty. So what does this mean?

For starters it means that your work is a core part of your humanness. You are made in the image of a *working* God. God is king over the world, and you're a king, a queen – royalty – ruling on His behalf. Gathering up the creation's praise and somehow pushing it back to God Himself.

When you get up tomorrow morning and go to your job or school or whatever it is you do with your life, you're not just earning money to pay the bills or learning microbiology or raising kids or serving at your local church or nonprofit. You're being human. You're ruling over the earth.

Secondly, this means we need to think of work as a *good* thing. When God was done working, He sat back and said, This is really good. That's how we should view our work.

So many people think of work as the curse. I hear it all the time, I hate my job. Work is the curse. But *nothing* could be further from the truth. Work is cursed, yes – more on that later. But work itself is the exact opposite – a *blessing*. And no, that's not a misprint. In the creation story we read, "God *blessed* them and said, 'Be fruitful . . . fill the earth . . . subdue it . . . rule . . .'" A blessing in *Genesis* is a weighty, strong thing – it's a gift from the Creator God to generate life, fertility, and well-being. And what is God's blessing over humans? *Work*.

We'll get into what "be fruitful" and "fill the earth" mean in the next chapter, but for now, it's basically the work of building civilization. God's original intent was always for human beings to join Him in His seven-day rhythm of work and rest. We need to recapture this stunning vision of humanness.

And then lastly, this means that every human on the planet is bursting with raw, uncut potential. You are bursting with raw, uncut potential. You have the blood of royalty in your veins.

So wherever you're at – here's the first takeaway: You're royalty. A king or queen. Made to rule, to subdue. You have a dizzying amount of pent-up potential in you – to do good or to do evil. What kind of ruler will you be?

You were made to do *good*– to mirror and mimic what God is like to the world. To stand at the interface between the Creator and His creation, implementing God's creative, generous blessing over all the earth and giving voice to the creation's worship....

That said, this command to “be fruitful and increase in number” doesn’t *just* mean get married and have kids. It’s more than that. After all, why would God *command* it? I’m pretty sure it would just happen. Human beings aren’t very good at keeping their pants on, and birth control wasn’t exactly easy to come by ten thousand years ago. Why is this part of human’s job description? I mean, animals are “fruitful” and “increase in number,” but it’s not ruling. What gives?

The key is in the next line: “Fill the earth.”

The idea here is for Adam and Eve to take their fledgling family and make it into something more — a society. God wants more for Adam and Eve than an ancient version of Swiss Family Robinson; He wants a civilization. He wants human beings to make babies and to make churches, community centers, schools, social services, governments, entire countries. All of this falls under the rubric of “fill the earth.”

Which leads to the second part of human’s job description: “Subdue it.” Meaning, harness the raw, uncut potential of the earth itself. Make something of the world you’ve been dropped into.

You have a forest — do something with it. You have a river — make it work for you. You have metal deep in the earth’s crust — get it out. You have sun and wind and soil and rain — *do something with it*. Plant crops, build houses, invent solar power, design computers, make music, shape art, come up with technology — *fill the earth and subdue it*.

This word *subdue* seems to indicate there’s an inherent wildness to the world. It’s untamed. Out of control. In desperate need of ruling.

We have a picture in our head of the antediluvian world as perfect — this dreamy mirage of leisure and opulence. But that’s *so not* the picture in *Genesis*. The first thing we read is that the world is *tohu wabohu*. One of my favorite Hebrew scholars translated that line as “wild and like a wasteland.” And then the first week is a flurry of activity. God is hard at work, taming the earth into something hospitable for life. Then human is created to rule — to continue the project that God started. To subdue His adolescent world. This is the language of conquest and colonization. To wrestle with the earth and wring profit from its hands.

But once again, that doesn’t mean trash the environment, pollute the atmosphere, stockpile nuclear weapons, strip-mine for ore, farm away the topsoil, or any other stupid thing that we’ve done in the name of “the Bible says.” No, there is a very specific *kind* of world we are to make. It’s called Eden.

Eden from *Garden City* by John Mark Comer

Read: Genesis 1-22

There are actually two creation stories in *Genesis*. Chapter 1 tells the story from thirty thousand feet — it’s about the “heavens and the earth.” But then chapter 2 zeroes in on a Garden called Eden — a Hebrew word meaning “delight.” This spot’s address is Delight. Not a bad place to call home. We read this:

“Now no shrub had yet appeared on the earth and no plant had yet sprung up, for the Lord God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no one to work the ground . . .”

So the world is incomplete. There’s no tree, no bush, no agriculture or irrigation, and no human.

“Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.”

In Hebrew there’s a play on words. *Adam* (the man) is made from the *adamah* (the ground). It’s a poetic way of saying that human has a symbiotic relationship with the earth itself. We’re made from the dust. Which is why the first human profession was gardening . . .

“Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the East, in Eden . . .”

And . . .

“The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.”

Let’s drill down on two ideas here: *work* it and *take care* of it. The first word is *abad* in Hebrew, and it basically means work. But that’s not the only way it’s translated into English. Sometimes it’s translated “service.” So work is service. Service to God. Service to people made in His image — which is everybody. And, I would argue, service to the earth itself.

But *abad* is also the same word used all over the Hebrew Bible for worship. Interesting. So work and worship aren’t two separate ideas. They are connected at the hip. They are two translations of the *same word*. It’s tragic that we think of worship as a few songs at church every Sunday. That is worship — of course. But in a *Genesis*-shaped worldview — *all* of life is worship.

When you go to work every day, at least if it’s Garden kind of work, it’s an act of worship to the God who made you.

Now, this text is the first time we actually read the word work. Before this, all the language is lofty and conceptual — rule and subdue. But in Eden, it's gritty and earthy. Human is put in the Garden to “work it.”

I have to make a confession. I skipped part of the story earlier. It's a bit technical and boring, so I thought you'd just skim it (which I'm sure you would never do). But between the line about how God “planted a garden” and how he “put the man in the Garden,” there's an entire paragraph. And it's a bit odd sounding — that's why I left it out. Here it is . . .

(Don't even think about skipping this.)

“The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground — trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

“A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters. The name of the first is the Pishon; it winds through the entire land of Havilah, where there is gold. (The gold of that land is good; aromatic resin and onyx are also there.) The name of the second river is the Gihon; it winds through the entire land of Cush. The name of the third river is the Tigris; it runs along the east side of Ashur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

“The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden . . .”

Have you ever read that paragraph and thought to yourself, *Why is that there?* I love that parenthetical line — “The gold of that land is good; aromatic resin and onyx are also there.” I used to read that and think, *Who cares?* But I think I see what it's getting at now.

The author is saying that Eden is made up of *raw materials*. It's spilling over with pent-up potentiality. Everything you need to make a civilization is there; all you have to do is to cultivate it, to draw it out. But that's going to take some work.

I love Tim Keller's definition of work. He puts it this way: work is “rearranging the raw material of God's creation in such a way that it helps the world in general, and people in particular, thrive and flourish.”

Bring it. This rhythm is found in all sorts of work.

When a farmer takes soil and seed and rearranges it into a crop teeming with food for people to eat and enjoy. When a builder takes a tree and a rock and rearranges it into a home for somebody to sleep and play and make love and relax and *live* in. When a fashion designer takes fabric and metal and rearranges it into something with shape and beauty and functionality. When a musician takes a sound and a tone and a melody and rearranges it into something coherent and

mesmerizing. When a graphic designer takes a shape and a color palette and a typeface and rearranges it into something catchy and tasteful.

All of this is the work of cultivation. Of drawing out something's potential. In fact, our word *culture* comes straight from this idea of cultivation. Good culture is the result of even better people hard at work, rearranging the raw stuff of Planet Earth into a place of delight.

So we're not just called to any kind of work. Some work doesn't do this at all. Some work is destructive to the earth, to the human brain, to the economy, to the family, to the developing world. We're called to a very specific kind of work. To make a Garden-like world where image bearers can flourish and thrive, where people can experience and enjoy God's generous love. A kingdom where God's will is done "on earth as it is in heaven," where the glass wall between earth and heaven is so thin and clear and translucent that you don't even remember it's there.

That's the kind of world we're called to make.

After all, we're just supposed to continue what God started in the beginning.

Garden to Garden City from *Garden City* by John Mark Comer

Read: 1 Corinthians 3, Revelation 22

Here's what you have to understand: the Garden was *dynamic*, not *static*. Put another way, creation was a *project*, not a *product*. The Garden was designed to go somewhere. God's vision was for the order and artistry and beauty of Eden to spread out over the whole earth — and human was the one entrusted with that job, to "fill the earth" with the Garden's reality.

Think of a violent, untamed wilderness teeming with beauty, but no infrastructure, no roads, no bridges, no cities, no civilization, and God says, *Go make a world*.

That's why *at the end* of the Bible, when the prophet John sees the future world remade at Jesus' return, he writes about it in the language of Eden. The last two chapters of *Revelation* are dripping with allusion after allusion to the *first two* chapters of the Bible. We read about . . .

"The tree of life,"

"The river,"

"No longer will there be any curse,"

“They will reign (or rule) for ever and ever.”

The writer John is saying that the future is the return to the past. It’s the return to Eden. But notice, something has changed. It’s not a garden anymore; it’s a Garden-like *city*.

Why? I mean, you would think that if Jesus’ agenda is to fix the world gone awry, then the story would end up back where it all started – in Eden, with everybody naked and unashamed. But instead, it’s a little different. Actually, it’s *a lot* different. It’s a Garden-like city called New Jerusalem with walls and gates and streets and dwellings and art and architecture and food and drink and music and *culture*.

Why is that?

Because the Garden was never supposed to stay a garden; *it was always supposed to become a garden city*.

Boom.

I feel like there should be applause or something right now.

The writer Paul has this letter to the Corinthians in the New Testament. In it, he writes about how he and his friend Apollos both played a strategic role in the church. He puts it this way, “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow.” Now, planting, watering, growing – this is Eden imagery, and it’s likely that any self-respecting first-century Jew would have picked up on the allusion.

And all of Paul’s language builds up to this staggering line: “For we are God’s coworkers.” This is a provocative metaphor. Most of us think of ourselves as God’s employees, not His coworkers. As if we’re working for God. And there’s some truth in that. Paul loves to call himself God’s servant. But if we’re God’s coworkers, that means we’re not only working *for* God, we’re also working *with* God.

He’s back to the imagery of partners.

What’s the difference between an employee and a partner?

In one word - ownership.

When you go to work tomorrow, remember, you’re not just a designer with a clothing label; you’re a partner with God, taking the human project forward.

You’re not just a mom or dad getting your kids off to school or reading a story before bed; you’re living up to God’s call on your life to “be fruitful and increase in number.”

You're not just a contractor, working long, hard days in the heat and cold to build a house; you're cultivating the earth, drawing out its potential, and reshaping the world into an environment for people to live as God intended.

You're not just a student going to class, or a light-rail operator going to the station, or a software engineer working on a new app, or a chef coming up with a new recipe, or a scientist in his or her lab, or a checker standing in place at a grocery store, or an entrepreneur working out some crazy idea . . .

You are a modern day Adam or Eve. This world is what's left of the Garden. And your job is to take all the raw materials that are spread out in front of you, to *work it*, to *take care of it*, to *rule*, to *subdue*, to wrestle, to fight, to explore, and to take the creation project forward as an act of service and worship to the God who made you.

Finding Joy - Marnie Hines

Read: Matthew 11:27-30, 2 Corinthians 12:9, Philippians 3:10-14

I don't know what's changed with me this time around for my walks. I find that this time, it just clicked that going out in the fresh air changes everything. It physiologically changes my body, I can feel it from head to toe. It just changes me, calms me down but also lifts me up. I love listening for the birds. Or, you know, there's somebody doing their lawn and I get to enjoy the smell of the grass. Seasons even have different scents, Spring and Fall are totally different.

And then I got into gardening.

Before David, I started two flower gardens. I started to get out and enjoy my garden, just enjoying how the sweet peas smell and getting to watch them grow up, and then the big peonies that my mom used. There's something about hydrangeas that I just love. And it's become exciting, seeing how the flowers change through the season, and even how my garden changes year to year. I forget what colors some of them are and so it's a neat surprise to see what they turn out to be each year.

There's a bit of weeding to do, and watering, they need to be taken care of, but it's so good to visit the flowers and see how they're growing. It's exciting to see how they grow up, getting stronger and bigger. It increases my happy. When I'm out there with my garden, I don't listen to a podcast or music or anything, I get to just be with the flowers and enjoy silence and solitude, find whatever connection I need with

God. I'm learning to be okay in the silence, to get lost in my thoughts in a good way, not stuck or ruminating, but just being present with God and my flowers.

And being out there, it just lifts the happiness out of me. I also live across the street from the school, and so if I'm out there in the morning or at school break I can listen to the moms and kids chattering, and I get to say hello to other people walking by who sometimes put their head in my sprinkler when it's hot. It connects me to my neighborhood.

And then David's been getting into gardening, and watching his excitement makes me happy too. It's his garden, and I get to participate in it. He often says, "Mama Bear, come and look at this," and he's so excited. I'm the one who makes sure the watering gets done, because that's not the fun part for him, but as he grows and learns, I get to practice stepping back and letting him learn. Even with mistakes it doesn't matter, because he's learning and he's enjoying it and so what if it's imperfect? He's learning to work in his garden and gets excited when things grow.

There have been a couple times where I've had to apologize and say, "You know, David, this is your garden too and I apologize. It doesn't to be my way, so let's do it your way. How can I help you?" Gardening is important to me, to get to garden for myself, but it's also means a lot to me to be able to facilitate that for David, to be able to allow him to be able to own it himself. And he just wants me out there doing and seeing and looking too - I don't have to do anything other than just look at what he's growing and sharing that with him.

We're growing food, cauliflowers and blueberries and strawberries... And David's excited to dream and talk about that, which things we're going to have when we go on a picnic, what we're going to bake with, who he can share the vegetables with and tell them it's something he grew himself. It also take him back to times with his grandparents and gardening with his grandpa growing up. It gives him a form of exercise, it engages his brain, and gives him a sense of excitement that we're growing something! It gives him opportunities for generosity, he wants to maybe take some to the food bank, or maybe make a little garden stand to share what he grows with the community that way. Not just tell people about it, but getting to share something tangible is good and it makes it fun. It's nourishing physically, because it's food; it's nourishing mentally, because it's engaging; it's nourishing spiritually, because it gives us joy.

With the gardening, God has taught me that it's okay that it's not perfect. There's a part of me that needs everything to be tickety-boo. But it's become something more creative. It's okay to just enjoy the flowers. And to enjoy figuring out how to change it for next year. Or not, because it looks nice the way it is and because having the flowers is the point, not it being the perfect 'look'. So what it looks like is

not as important to me as the smell of jasmine and sweet peas, being able to sit on the deck and enjoy all of that. Just having the flowers gives me more joy than what it actually looks like. I think God is teaching me through this that it's okay to not be perfect. It's okay not to be okay. There's still joy in this.

From REALationships: Parenting (Part 1) by Dr. Estera Boldut

This is an excerpt from a message given by Dr. Estera Boldut at Brookwood Church in 2021, regarding attachment theory and the love of God in Scripture. You can view the whole message on our YouTube channel, posted Oct. 30, 2021

The garden metaphor suggests that when we are born we receive a plot of land. It's given to our parents for keeping; our parents, our caregivers, they plant seeds and tend this garden. When we grow up we take it over. Some of us receive a great garden full of plants ready to bear fruit. Other people receive a plot of land that is totally neglected, it looks like a desert. Others receive something that is more just basic stuff, maybe a fruit tree and some grass. But others receive a plot of land that holds a lot of terrible wretched things.

Once we take this over, we become responsible for this plot; once we become adults, then it's ours to manage. Is it fair? No. It's not. Can we compare? We cannot. We don't know what plot of land we all received from our families.

The beautiful thing and the positive thing for me is that we do have a choice. Many people don't realize that; often people don't do anything with this plot of land, others start to clean, start to work on it continue to work on it, but many people don't do anything with what they received and they only pass it on to their children. If we are not aware of what we have in our lives, we cannot change. We cannot change what we are not aware of. (Psalm 139)

There's lots of wisdom in the Scriptures. We are learning from God, God who sent His only Son to show us true love (John 3:16, 1 John 4:7-21). And when we talk about relationships, that's the bottom of it: we have to come back to love. How we receive love from our human parents impacts how we understand love, and it impacts how we give love to others.

Lots of people around Jesus seem quite rigid. The people of the law used to come to Jesus and say, "What is the most important law, we want to know exactly, to follow it to the dot." What did Jesus say? "Love God with all your heart and love your neighbors like you love yourself." (Matthew 22:34-40) This is more flexible and

difficult in so many ways, because that may mean different things in different times of our life.

Our insecurities and our rigidity comes out of fear, comes out of this desire to do well, to function well, and it comes out of this not knowing, often, where this safe haven is. Where this safe place is. And then God really, truly, gave us His Son so we understand love.

Do you remember Jesus' last prayer before He went to heaven? He said, "Father, I'm praying that My disciples would love each other. That's how the world would know that they belong to Us, because they would love each other." (John 17)

To me, what that means is that we truly learn what belonging is, we truly learn what life is, what safe haven is here on earth, and we learn it from God in so many ways, because human love is imperfect. All of us go to anxiety or avoidance when we get distraught; only God is the One who provides the safe haven. (Psalm 107:28-31; Psalm 91; Psalm 23)

From REALationships: Parenting (Part 2) by Dr. Estera Boldut

All of us are like an iceberg, with only a little of the whole showing above the water; the majority of it is below the surface. Everything that we see in our children and in our loved ones is just the behaviour. What is underneath there is unseen; we hold a lot of emotions and perceptions about ourselves, the messages we received... and if we don't become aware of the messages we received we can never really change them. And then we have expectations, oh don't start me on that one. We have a lot of expectations from others, and we have expectations that we think that others have form us because we act on assumptions.

But deep down there, at the yearnings level, even if you don't know anything about anybody else in the world, we know this much: we have the same yearnings. God gave us the same yearnings to be loved, to be accepted the way we are, and to belong. As humans we fail at fulfilling those expectations sometimes, and only God can hold and fulfill all these yearnings. The tricky part, though, is God gives us responsibilities to love each other the way He loved us, because we model and we learn from God and we pass it on.

How do we learn from God true love and pass it on? Because we have responsibilities to show God's love. We need to learn to be vulnerable and express our emotions... Expressing our emotions in prayer, being honest with ourselves and

being honest with God, where we are naming exactly what happens, sitting with whatever it is and allowing it to be, learning to see God as this safe haven. When I am distraught, when things go awry, I come to God, this safe haven. That's the image we need to hold on to. (Psalm 55; 1 Peter 5:7; Psalm 42)

To come to God's way of love and compassion. How do we do that? Three little things you can find in Scripture:

Prayer of Gratitude. Noticing things we are grateful for. (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, Psalm 100:4-5)

Savouring. Just as simple as it sounds, savouring means sitting with where we are, the experience we are having, just for a moment longer. How often do we eat and do something else, and we don't even taste the food? When we walk, just looking at the colors of the trees, and soak that in just one more moment. (Psalm 19)

And the third one is Practicing Awe. We learn how to step back and look at what we have in this big world that God created, and put ourselves in perspective. When we are anxious, when things are hard, it becomes a lot about ourselves. The practice of awe takes a step back, to put ourselves in perspective... small, not insignificant, we are still lovable and worthy... but we need to know our place. Look at the sky and see the stars, look at the trees and just allow yourself to be immersed. We are part of this safe haven that God provides for us here on this earth. (Psalm 8, Psalm 18, Psalm 33)

All from One Kernel - Wendell Phillips

Read: 2 Corinthians 9:6-12

God provides incredible abundance in our gardens. From a single kernel of corn can come a corn stalk that can be seven feet tall... that in turn produces several cobs of corn... and each cob may have two hundred kernels...

All from one kernel of corn.

The multiplication and generosity and abundance of God is amazing...

Read: Ephesians 3:14-21

A Single Plant Does Not Prosper - Wendell Phillips

Another lesson from corn is that a single plant does not prosper. You need several plants growing up together in a field or a cluster in your garden. The plants need each other... the same as our need for one another in the church.

Read: Genesis 2:7-8, 15-24; Ecclesiastes 4:7-12; Psalm 68:5-6;
1 Corinthians 12

Cultivate Community from *Cultivate Sacred Soil* by Joshua Weisbrod (submitted by Carolyn Phillips)

In the *Cultivate Sacred Soil* Plan, spiritual growth is likened to tending a garden. Through biblical insights and practical reflection, this 7-day plan will encourage you to embrace God's process, trust His work, and actively grow in your relationship with Him. Discover how your faith can flourish and bear fruit that glorifies God and inspires others. Nurture the soil of your heart for a life that thrives in Christ.

Read: Genesis 2:18; Romans 15:5-6; John 15:15-16; John 13:34-35

Community is one of the most beautiful and challenging aspects of faith. In Genesis 2:18, God declares that it is not good for man to be alone, showing us that we were created for relationships. Much like a garden thrives when different plants grow together, sharing nutrients and supporting one another, our spiritual lives flourish in the context of community.

Romans 15:5-6 reminds us that unity glorifies God. Community isn't just about gathering people—it's about cultivating harmony and shared purpose. This takes intentional effort, much like tending a garden. The analogy of companion planting—a gardening practice where certain plants grow better together—illustrates how our lives are enriched when we support and encourage one another in faith. No one grows well in isolation; we need others to nourish, challenge, and strengthen us.

However, cultivating community requires getting your hands dirty. In John 15:15-16, Jesus calls us His friends and appoints us to bear lasting fruit. This fruit often grows through the wonderful, messy work of building relationships. Real community involves stepping into the soil of life with others—walking alongside them in their joys and struggles, forgiving their shortcomings, and allowing them to do the same for us. Just as a gardener isn't afraid to dig into the dirt, we must be willing to

engage in the imperfections of others, knowing that love and grace make growth possible.

Forgiveness and love are at the heart of cultivating community. In John 13:34-35, Jesus commands us to love one another as He has loved us. This kind of love is sacrificial, patient, and forgiving. Community is messy because people are imperfect, but it's in this messiness that God does His greatest work. Forgiving and loving one another is like pulling weeds from a garden—it's necessary to create space for healthy growth. When we forgive, we uproot bitterness and resentment, allowing the beauty of reconciliation to flourish.

True community also involves vulnerability. Sharing your heart, your struggles, and your hopes with others is like planting seeds in open soil—it feels risky, but it's the only way to experience the fruit of deep connection. When we allow ourselves to be known and loved, we reflect the heart of Jesus, who invites us into friendship with Him and with one another.

Today, reflect on the relationships in your life. Are there people you need to forgive or love more intentionally? Are there areas where you can step out of your comfort zone to connect with others? Like a garden that requires consistent care, community takes effort, but the rewards are worth it.

Community is God's design for growth. As you cultivate this field, embrace the messiness, extend grace, and nurture the connections that draw you closer to Him and to others. Let love and forgiveness be the tools you use to cultivate relationships that glorify God and bear lasting fruit.

Fruit In The Challenges - Renée Netterfield

When we lived in Edmonton, we experienced a three-year drought. We were grateful for a well-run province that was able to continue to provide water for personal use but eventually we were asked to ration carefully. No watering outside. Lawns, flowering plants, and even dusty cars suffered from the lack of water. We learned to collect water used for personal needs and carry it out to keep some of our more special plants alive.

It wasn't until the third year that we began to notice the severe impact on the trees, especially along the highways and country roads. The trees began to develop cones. Hundreds of cones burst out on every branch and became so heavy the branches began to sag and bend. We were told this was the last gasp of life in the

tree. God had ordained that in deep stress the trees would produce many cones so that if the tree died there were seeds released to be carried off and replanted wherever they landed. It felt as if we were watching a miracle all around us.

Psalm 1: 1- 3 blesses my heart as I think about those trees bravely living through 3 years without water.

“Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on His law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.”

The roots of those trees had gone deep into the soil and were protected from the challenges of drought for a long time. When the stress of loss became too great they produced life to be carried on. Their deep stress produced great fruit and others were blessed. May I be like those trees. May my roots go deep in the peaceful times so that when the challenges come there is rich nourishment for survival. And when it seems the challenges are almost overwhelming may the Spirit of God produce good fruit to honor Him and bless others.

Gardens in the Wilderness by Skye Jethani (from With God Daily)

Read: Luke 5:1-11; Genesis 3:17-19

With the miraculous catch of fish, we are introduced to a recurring theme in the gospels. Many of Jesus’ parables and his miracles are about abundance. In Luke’s telling of the story, no attention is given to the mechanics or method of the miracle. Did Jesus command the fish into the net using his authority over nature? Did Jesus simply know where to find the fish using his divine knowledge? Did he multiply the fish as he would later do when feeding the multitudes? Luke doesn’t say. The focus is not on the *nature* of the miracle, but entirely on the *outcome* of the miracle.

However big the reader might assume the catch of fish was, Luke wants us to know it was even bigger. First, he says it was a “larger number of fish.” Then, he says the nets began to break. Then, a second boat was called to help. Then, both boats were completely filled. Then, in a final flourish to drive home the magnitude of the catch, Luke says both boats began to sink under the weight of the fish. There’s an

implied message that the catch was beyond anything the fishermen, or our imaginations, could possibly contain.

This focus on the outrageous number of fish is our first introduction to the theme of abundance in the gospels, but it has a very long history in the Old Testament going all the way back to the creation account in Genesis. There, we are told the garden in the land of Eden is distinguished for its abundance. Eden functioned as a sacred space, a sort of temple where God and humans lived together. There was an abundance of water, food, and everything else necessary for human flourishing, including access to never-ending life. Outside the garden, however, in the wilderness where humanity was eventually banished after rebelling against God, there was scarcity. People would have to toil to secure enough food, always fear not having enough water, and eventually, the dirt would reclaim their bodies as death enslaved the world.

Fast forward the story to the book of Exodus, and we discover something remarkable. After freeing his people from bondage in Egypt, the Lord leads them into the wilderness with a pillar of cloud and fire. But rather than the domain of scarcity, his presence transformed the wilderness into a place of abundance. He provided them water from rocks, bread from heaven, and meat from the sky—and these resources were far more abundant than what the people needed. Even their clothes and shoes do not wear out on the journey. It's as if God's presence with his people rolled back the curse to create little pockets of Eden in the wilderness. Wherever heaven touched the earth, gardens of abundance burst open with life and beauty and goodness. The connection between God's presence and abundance is carried throughout the stories, poetry, and prophecies of the Hebrew Bible. The people understood that when the messianic King arrived and God's kingdom was established on earth, it would be marked by the transformation of wilderness scarcity into Eden-like abundance.

Strictly speaking, the region of Galilee was not a wilderness, but Luke uses the language of the wilderness to describe the fishermen. He says, they had toiled hard all night but caught nothing (Luke 5:5). This is an echo of Genesis 3 where God curses the ground and explains to Adam that it will now require “painful toil” and the “sweat of your brow” to produce food, but it will never be enough. No matter how hard you work, the ground will still win when it reclaims your body in death (see Genesis 3:17-19). Pain, toil, scarcity, and futility—that's life in the wilderness. That's what Peter and the other fishermen experienced after a long night of meaningless work.

Then along came Jesus telling them to go back out and let down their nets one more time. And suddenly the wilderness was transformed. Scarcity became abundance. Emptiness became fruitfulness. Desperation became jubilation. Peter

and the others understood immediately what they were witnessing. Heaven had touched the earth. The same abundance their ancestors had known when God led them through the desert in Exodus had just appeared on the shore of Galilee. The kingdom of God was among them, and it was centered around this carpenter and rabbi from Nazareth named Jesus. This explains why the fishermen would leave their business at the moment of its greatest success. Just as their ancestors had followed the pillar of cloud and fire through the wilderness, Peter, James, and John now followed Jesus. He represented the presence of God and his kingdom in the wilderness of the world.

Weekly Prayer from Brother Roger of Taizé (1915 - 2005)

O Christ,

tirelessly you seek out those who are looking for you

and who think that you are far away;

teach us, at every moment,

to place our spirits in your hands.

While we are still looking for you,

already you have found us.

However poor our prayer,

you hear us far more than we can imagine or believe.

Amen.

But, God, I Don't Want to Plant a Garden Here by Tracie Miles (Proverbs31.org)

“This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ‘Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce.’” Jeremiah 29:4-5 (NIV)

During difficult times of life or when facing hard transitions, I have found myself struggling to understand God’s plans.

In seasons I certainly don’t want to embrace or settle into, many times my desires don’t line up with God’s plans. I cry out for rescue, hoping He will swoop in and remove me from my uncomfortable situation — but sometimes His response is, *Stay where you are. Build houses, plant gardens, and live your life.*

Jeremiah 29:4 portrays this surprising command given to God’s people in exile. Taken from their homeland to Babylon, the people of Judah longed for a quick return to Jerusalem. They wanted to be rescued, for God to undo their captivity and restore them to their former lives. But instead of immediate deliverance, God’s message through the prophet Jeremiah was to settle down in the very place they wanted to escape.

“This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ‘Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce’” (Jeremiah 29:4-5).

It’s not difficult to imagine their frustration and hopelessness. *But, God, we don’t want to plant gardens and build houses here. We don’t belong here. This is not our home. Fix this, Lord!*

Yet God’s command was clear — He had a purpose for the Israelites in Babylon. They wanted to hear His plans for immediate relief, but instead they heard that their stay would not be short. Thus He encouraged them to embrace the present instead of wasting their days longing for the past or dreaming of a faraway future.

This passage challenges our perspective on difficult seasons of life. We often plead with God to change our circumstances, to remove our pain, struggle or discomfort. But sometimes God’s answer is not to change our situation but to change *us* within it. He invites us to build and plant, creating and loving life in the very place we don’t want to be.

Perhaps you currently feel out of place, longing for God to change your situation. It’s natural to want to escape hardship and discomfort. But what if God is telling you to stay and “plant a garden” right where you are? What if He is cultivating something within you that requires time, patience and perseverance so true growth can take place?

Resist the urge to merely endure. Instead, ask God how you can invest in the season He has you in, and trust He has a plan even in the waiting.

He's got you, and you've got this. Now, go plant that garden.

Lord, life has changed, and it feels so difficult. Please give me peace, the ability to embrace where You have me, and the courage to live fully, trusting in Your plans for me and Your sovereignty over all things. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Pruning by Krista Konyk

God Prunes, We Hurt, God Heals & Restores

God prunes away the branches that are no good. They may have been good for a season, but after a while it stops producing good fruit, or it no longer has a purpose in our lives.

I think friendships are that that.

People come for a season; we can learn & grow, but then after a while it goes bad and as hard as it seems, it needs to get pruned. I feel this is what has happened in my life.

I saw good and tried to glean from a friend who was open to share, but I jumped into things without fully seeking God.

I was told by my sweet husband to cut it off, "stop following her." Even another friend told me it is not good, that she is "cringe". So, I will be friendly with her but will not pursue a friendship. I had wanted things to happen, and so often I do it my own way. But God has something better. This is the second friendship my husband has told me "it's not good or healthy, cut it off"

I read in a devotional on gardening of a woman who checked on her tomato plants to find that a horn worm had destroyed most of a plant, stripping away the leaves and eating some of the fruit. She squashed the worm and began to nurture the plant. She said that what it has caused the plant to do was to grow deeper roots. "The enemy of our heart is also a devourer. Satan come to bring defeat, discouragement, and devastation. He comes to steal our joy, kill our hope, and destroy our faith. In the path of his destruction we are left stripped, feeling as if we have been reduced and diminished to bare stems."

She took care of that plant, paying attention to it and watering it. When all the other plants were not flowering or producing fruit, that plant was thriving with new growth.

This is so much like my friendships and business.

Look at Joseph and what happened to him (Gen. 30-50). He was sold, abused, wrongfully accused, thrown in prison, forgotten about; but God had a plan to save people's lives, including his brothers who had wronged him. He got to see them again and said this to them:

“As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive” Gen 50:20

There is another verse that is insightful:

“And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” Romans 8:28

So take courage.

“I (Jesus) am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes (cleans) it so that it may bear more fruit.” John 15:1-2

Pruning hurts, but bad, diseased parasites destroy! So as hard as it feels, let the Holy Spirit work and remove whatever it is that is holding back big, sweet, delicious fruit in your life.

“Weeping may last for the night, but a shout of joy comes in the morning.” Psalm 30:5b

A well-pruned tree produces good fruit, and neglected, un-pruned, over-crowded tree produces small, yucky fruit.

Devotional Reflection Questions on Pruning (John 15:1-2)

Heart Check

1. What “fruit” is currently growing in my life?


(Think love, joy, peace, patience, etc. – Galatians 5:22-23)

2. Are there areas where fruit is missing or weak? Why might that be?

3. Am I resisting God’s pruning process in any way? What fears or attachments are holding me back?

 **Holy Spirit's Guidance**

1. What is the Holy Spirit highlighting that needs to be removed or trimmed? (e.g., habits, attitudes, thought patterns, relationships, distractions)
2. Is there something that was once good but has now become a hindrance to growth?
3. Is there a good thing in my life that God is asking me to surrender so He can bring something better?

 **Spiritual Growth**

1. How have I experienced growth or deepened faith through seasons of pruning in the past?
2. What is God inviting me to grow into through this current season of refinement?
3. What spiritual disciplines (prayer, Word, solitude, etc.) help me stay connected to the Vine (Jesus)?

 **Response Prompt**

1. What is one step I can take this week to cooperate with God's pruning in my life?

Stressed Vines by Beth Moore

Grapes are the single most profitable fruit on the planet. See, is it any wonder in our parallel, of all things it is a grapevine Jesus is talking about in John chapter 15 when He speaks of our fruit-bearing. Verses 1 through 11: "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit". I wanna just throw this out to you because somebody in here, you thought, "Well, you know, I guess the reason why He cut that one back is because I didn't manage it well. I didn't do well with it". That's not true.

Do you know that sometimes when you feel like God is picking on you, it is not because you're doing a poor job. It is because you are a fruit-bearer and He is coming for you, knowing that He can entrust this process to you. He has not picked on you; He has picked you out. I gotta know that sometimes. I gotta know I'm not

being picked on; that I'm being picked out, because He believes He can produce much fruit from me.

Verse 3: "Already you are clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in Him, He it is that bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. But if you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be My disciples. As the Father has loved Me, so have I loved you. Abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full".

So the very first time I perked up and thought, "Oh, I think I'm gonna teach on this," was when we were with a young woman driver who'd come to pick us up at the Little Resort out in the middle of a vineyard and about 20 minutes from Sienna and she drove us in. This woman was proud of the part of the world she was from, and she said some words to me that completely riveted me: "Grapes grow in rocky soil. It makes them work harder". And then she smiled and glanced back over the back seat and looked at me and she said, "Stressed vines make the best wines". And I thought, "Oh Lord, have mercy, then I've got some good capability for some good wines coming out of this spirit, because I'm under some stress". Anybody else?

I want you to hear part of an article out from a blogger that is a wine connoisseur out of the UK by the name of Jamie Goode, and he writes this: "More modern methods of growing grapes in close-spaced rows on wire trellising take advantage of the fact that making the vines struggle generally results in better quality grapes. It's a bit like people," he writes, "Place someone in a near-perfect environment, giving them every comfort and all that they could ever want to satisfy their physical needs, and it could have rather disastrous consequences for their personality and physique. If you take a grapevine and make its physical requirements for water and nutrients easily accessible then, somewhat counterintuitively, it will give you poor grapes".

"Forgive my anthropomorphism," he says, "but this is because the grapevine has a choice. Given a favorable environment and it will choose to take the vegetative route: that is, it will put its energies into making leaves and shoots. Effectively, it is saying, 'This is a fine spot, I'm going to make myself at home here.' It won't be too bothered about making grapes. But make things difficult for the vine, by restricting water supply, making nutrients scarce, pruning it hard and crowding it with very close

neighbors, and it will take the hump. It will sense that this is not the ideal place to be a grapevine. And instead of devoting itself to growing big and sprawling, it will focus its efforts on reproducing itself sexually, which for a vine means making grapes".

And there's this little quote that he says toward the end of it: "Struggling vines concentrate more of their energies on fruit production". I thought, if this is not iconic in the believing life, because we don't want this to be so, I don't want it to be so, but why is it a fact that if we have nothing but a cushion around us all the time, everything just goes easy for us, thing about is we don't produce a lot of fruit. I said to somebody the other day as gently as I knew how, I just want y'all to know, I have a lot of room for growth. Anybody else? 'Cause sometimes something doesn't bring out the best in me.

I said to somebody, "When is the last time you were around anybody in a desperate condition? Do you know anyone that's poor? Do you know a single mother with four kids who's trying to get those things to school"? But, y'all, it's hard. We're already under some stress. We might as well use it. I mean, you could leave today going, "I have the capacity to be a fine wine, 'cause I am under some stress". You can say to your family, "You have just improved the quality of my wine. I can thank you for this. Thank you, family. Thank you, friends. Thank you, in-laws. Thank you, thank you. Thank you, family holidays. Thank all of you".

We're gonna get crushed in this life. I'm not speaking that prophetically. I'm speaking that realistically. You cannot live long on planet Earth, I don't even know if you can make it to 18 years old until you've had your heart totally crushed. This is a place, this is a broken Earth. It's a very, very flawed and broken and wounded and fractured planet and we will see all things renewed and we will see God's will done on Earth as it is in heaven. But for now, until the renewing, our globe is groaning.

Romans chapter 8 says that all of creation groans, it's this groaning, the full redemption of the sons and the daughters of God, of the renewal of all things. Just groaning for that day and we're seeing that. But here's what I wanna tell you. Remember we got three life stages of the grape. And it's one of the things that makes it so fascinating. I want you to look at the life course of this fruit berry because we have the ripe fruit right here, multi-colored, ripe. Just can eat it right now. We've got raisins a little bit later.

So when it dries up a little bit, there's still nutrition right here. And then we got the long-term right here. This becomes the wine. This becomes the long-lasting. Tables grapes and raisins are pretty affordable. But wine starts getting expensive. Starts getting expensive because you know what has had to happen to a grape for it to become wine? It's had to have been crushed.

Now here's what I want to say to you. A whole lot of us have been crushed anyway. Again, then let's use it. Lord, then instead of bringing forth bitter vinegar, bring forth a flowing sweet wine from my life that somebody could taste and see that my God is good. Olives and grapes and grains, all the big harvests of God, all of those things, what they have in common, olive, grapes, and grains, is to become their ultimate food, all three of them have to be pressed and crushed.

We will be helped a lot in our personal journey with God if we would quit confusing what is a crushing with what is a pressing. I don't mean "oppressing," I mean just pressing. Because there is legit, crushing, but what I wanna suggest to you is that we can have such a shrek over a pressing that we start reacting at a ten to a pressing, and when it comes to a crushing, we got no coping skill whatsoever in the spirit because we already used it all. Or honestly, how in the world are we ever gonna work through brokenness, true brokenness and unfaithfulness in a marriage if we can't even get over the fact that he won't come home for lunch from work? I'm sorry, am I getting on anybody's nerves?

If we're gonna go to church and we're gonna get all hurt because we're not on the Praise Team anymore, we're gonna quit going. And so when all of a sudden something traumatic happens in our church and there's some kind of family goes through a terrible, well, we can't even show up. Why? Because I'm crushed by the press. There's real-life crushing. Don't be crushed by what was just a press. We can be so over-sensitive. Everything bothers us, everything bothers us. Listen, if you are mad at everyone, you are the common denominator. I learned that one difference between table grapes and wine grapes is that wine grapes have thicker skin. Ain't that a beautiful thing? You know, we need thicker skin. Not thicker hearts, not calloused hearts.

Proverbs 19:11 says this: "It is to one's glory to overlook an offense". It's to one's glory to overlook an offense. You know, if we're just offended constantly and there's so much offensive stuff going on and we're just wasting all this energy just getting offended at everybody and we're gonna talk back to everybody, we're gonna let them have a piece of our mind, we keep giving a piece of our minds and we got no mind left. "It seems like I don't know where my mind has gone". Well, you've given everybody a piece of it. Is that fair to say? We need to say to you, "I'm not gonna give you a piece of my mind because I need to keep that".

Remember when in 2 Corinthians 4:8 Paul says, "We are pressed but not crushed"? There are times, legit times, there's crushing. But he's drawing the difference out between the two. Yeah, there's pressure here. Yeah, there's stress here, but we're not crushed here.

I gotta tell you one of the most prominent, iconic features of the vineyard is the trellising. When it grows up on a trellis it can grow up a tree. When one of my articles said: "A grapevine will grow up anything. You put it next to anything. If we stood still long enough behind it, it would grow up us".

Vines are made for trellising. They're made to grow up something. There's this wonderful verse. You can write it down: Genesis 49:22: "Joseph is a fruitful bough, by a spring; and his branches run over the wall". He's talking about a fruitful vine. He's talking about you up against a wall. Grow over it, climb the thing and grow over it. Don't just go over it, grow over it. Productive vines learn to climb what they're up against. But God had two ways in His Word for His people of faith to deal with tall things like mountains. He said, "By faith, move 'em or climb 'em". Climb 'em. If it won't move, climb the thing. Climb the thing. Get on top of it.

Want to Be Faithful? Think Like a Farmer by Glenna Marshall

I tried to grow a garden once. It didn't go well.

I had great aspirations when I planted it. I pictured a well-watered and neatly weeded patch of earth that would yield a steady supply of summer vegetables. I planted, watered, and weeded really well—at first. But then came the heat. The bugs. The weeds. And it was taking such a long time for the sprouts to grow! Eventually, I gave up. It seemed easier to simply *buy* some vegetables at the grocery store.

Gardening requires patience and work that I wasn't willing to give. I wanted an instant harvest with minimal investment. I wanted fully grown vegetables without tending or waiting for them.

We often take a similar approach to spiritual maturity. In a world that values instant results, believers sometimes expect spiritual growth with minimal investment. We desire long-term faithfulness to Christ but aren't always practicing the God-ordained means of perseverance. We'd like Christian maturity to be quick and effortless.

But that's not how growth works.

In his epistle to suffering Christians, James calls us to consider the farmers as we wait for the Lord's return and pursue lives of steadfast faith. James instructs us: "Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the

early and the late rains. You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand” (James 5:7-8).

We’d like Christian maturity to be quick and effortless. But that’s not how growth works.

Having lived in a rural, farming community for the past 15 years, I’ve observed the patience of the area farmers. I once took a tour of a church member’s farm and was overwhelmed by the acres and acres of land that must be tended. Farmers work hard. They diligently plow and plant, and they persistently irrigate the fields during the dry summer months. But in the end, they must wait for the harvest. In the end, they depend on God for growth.

Farming our hearts for spiritual growth and faithfulness requires both investment and patience. Farmers don’t sit on their hands throughout spring and summer, hoping a few crops will pop up out of thin air. No, they work diligently toward the harvest. But they also know that they must wait patiently for the crops to take root, grow, and produce fruit. They work and wait. And that’s the approach every believer is called to take.

Work and Wait

What does it look like to work and wait for a harvest of long-term faithfulness? How do you irrigate your heart during a spiritual drought or fight the weeds and pests of temptation or doubt?

Peter tells us God has given us *everything* we need for life and godliness: *through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.* (2 Pet. 1:3-4)

Through the knowledge of God and his promises given in Scripture, we become more like him. Peter goes on to encourage believers to supplement their faith with godliness, knowledge, steadfastness, and self-control (see 2 Pet. 1:5-7). As we practice these qualities, God will bring about the fruit of our faith in Christ.

Paul exhorts us to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:12-13). There’s a promise bound up in this command to work and wait: God *will* bring about a harvest of growth and faithfulness in those who belong to him. He expects our obedience, but *he* will finish the work he has started in us (see. Phil. 1:6). We can take part in the practices of faithfulness that he’s given us with great confidence that he will bring about growth, maturity, and steadfastness in us.

We can trust *his* process for growth, waiting patiently for him to bring about that which he has promised.

To grow in knowledge of and love for God, we nourish our souls with truth by reading and meditating on Scripture. To fight sin and temptation, we draw near to him in prayer and outfit ourselves with his Word to help us stand firm (see Eph. 6:10-18). We lean on the body of Christ to encourage us when we're weak. We've been given the gift of God's living and active Word, free access to him in prayer, the help of the Holy Spirit, and regular exhortation from the church.

We are well equipped to work and wait for the day of the Lord with confidence and patience.

Harvest Is Sure

Our growth hinges upon both God's investment and our obedience. The Lord ordained our means of growth through prayer, Scripture intake, and the church just as he ordained for plants to grow through good soil, sunlight, and rain. We can trust *his* process for growth, waiting patiently for him to bring about what he's promised. He who called you is faithful, his will for your life is your sanctification, and he will keep his promise (1 Thess. 4:3; 5:24).

When it comes to growing long-term, everyday faithfulness in your life, think like a farmer who works and waits with patience, and know that the harvest is sure to come. One day, Jesus will present you pure and spotless before the Father, and what a harvest that will be!

Tree of Mystery from Mended by Angie Smith

I believe that I shall look up on the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living! Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord! - Psalm 27:13-14

Just before Easter I was driving the kids over to see my parents, and we were talking about all the beautiful trees we passed that seemed to have blossomed overnight. The whole neighborhood had been transformed with bursts of lavender, pink, and pure white. It looked like something out of a movie. A splash of petals blew across the road as we drove by, stirred loose by a cool gust of spring breeze, and we oohed and aahed at the Lord's handiwork.

"Which tree is your favorite, Kate?" I asked.

She pointed at a tall white tree that looked like it was covered with snowballs, keeping her finger pressed to the window as it faded out of sight. "That one is my favorite, Mommy."

Abby chose one that looked like hydrangeas. It might not have been. I know nothing of plants except that the mere sight of my face makes them wither and die. I'm pretty sure a rosebush I planted a few years ago picked up its roots and replanted itself in our neighbor's yard - a woman known to wear a belt stuffed with gardening tools while she works, as well as a hat that's roughly the size of New Mexico. She even uses a little pad to kneel on.

I really can't blame the roses.

"How about you, Ellie? Got a favorite?" She watched as the houses passed by, and then a few seconds later I heard her say quietly, "That one, Mommy. That one's my favorite. It's the prettiest one on the whoooooole street."

"Oh, I see it," I said. "Those pink leaves are such a cool color, aren't they? I would wear one of those behind my ear for a date with Daddy!"

"No, Mommy, not that one. The one next to it."

I slowed down the car because I hadn't really seen the one next to it. I asked her where she was looking.

"There. Right there."

I made a confused face and looked at her in the rearview mirror.

"I think it's dead, Mommy. It doesn't have anything on it. But it's the prettiest one."

I just sat and waited, fascinated by the fact that out of everything we were looking at - all the bursting, beautiful spring colors - this was the tree she'd chosen. "Tell me more, hon."

"Well... maybe it's just pretending to be dead. Maybe its flowers just haven't come out yet. Its kinda like it's keeping a secret. Nobody knows what it's going to do."

I sat stunned, with my hand on the gear shift, unable even to put it in drive because I so felt the presence of the Lord. He uses my girls so many times when He is speaking to me, and I know from experience it's best just to be still and soak it in. I smiled at her, instantly aware that she had said something I'd need to come back to ponder a bit more.

That night, as I settled in for some quiet time, I opened the Scripture to the Gospel of John - which, I must admit, is my favorite - and I began with the crucifixion, reading slowly, deliberately, ever mindful that the Lord was stirring in me a deeper understanding. I suppose I've read this account at least 45 million times (give or take 44 million or so). I know what happens next, and then next, and then next... okay, done. But as I moved this time into the part about Christ's resurrection, I started thinking about what Ellie had said. And I felt the story taking on new meaning for me.

Jesus died on a cross. He was prepared for burial and placed inside a tomb that was blocked by a stone. Early the next day, some of His followers went to visit the tomb, and He was gone. His linens were there, but He Himself was not. This is a very brief, very detail-lacking synopsis of the miracle of the resurrection.

But here's what I think is so very interesting...

We don't know exactly when He actually rose from the dead.

We don't know what happened in that dark tomb between Jesus and His Father. We haven't been given a visual for the exact moment of resurrection, other than the report that He arranged His linens neatly before He left - which I think is very polite of a man who just woke up from death. At some point in time, perhaps in the dark of night within that sealed tomb, a miracle happened. A secret. A beautiful truth His followers wouldn't be privy to until the next day.

Eventually, yes, they would realize the miracle. He would appear, and they would believe. He would ask for something to eat, Thomas would touch His wounds, and everyone would reach consensus that He had actually done what He said He'd do. But not before there had been a gap of time between the miracle itself and the moment when they were finally able to see the evidence of it.

A gap between death and new life.

And it struck me how, in a sense, we are living in that moment today. We are weeping in our homes, crying by an empty tomb, begging to see that we haven't been duped, that He isn't going to leave us to face the fact that it might have all been a hoax. We walk side-by-side with Him on the road to Emmaus, not knowing that He walks alongside us, unaware that the footsteps of the Holy are even now being imprinted next to ours.

We walk in that gap every day.

I think many of His followers were sure He was dead and gone, that they had been deceived. As far as I can tell, there weren't groups of people huddled around His tomb awaiting His exit. Instead, they were bundled up with their children, miles away, left with only their fears and doubts and imaginations while - guess what?

He was rising.

During those very moments.

The beautiful, resilient flower that we call our Christ was no longer dead, as He seemed.

I am shattered by the humble recognition that somewhere in the night, a divine plan is occurring I'm unaware of. While I tuck my children into bed and pray for Him to have His way with them, with me, and within my every thought, the witness of the resurrection tells me that miracles are being sown. Even now. Even in the dark.

And so I will remember the tomb. I will remember the tomb. I will remember the long, winding roads I must walk to see His face. I will anticipate the moment when the bread is broken and I fall face-first before Him in worship.

I will continue to choose the tree that bears secrets.

I will not be enticed by the blooms that fade quickly, but will rather allow myself to live in the mind of a seven-year-old who realizes that the most amazing things we can see in this life are the parts that are hidden, waiting for rebirth.

I believe with all my heart that one day I will be in the presence of the One Who watches my Audrey, and I will thank Him for the moments He gave me here on this earth in the presence of a crooked, withered tree I could have given up on long ago.

And in that place, I will know the secret. I will understand the mystery. I will cling to its truth and bow my head in reverence.

Beautiful Savior, may all the world see You in the midst of the blooming and choose to believe that Your splendor is waiting, somewhere beyond the brittle

branches. And may we live in such a way that we glorify the Man whose light once shone in the darkness of a tomb.

Soli Deo Gloria.

Mending

- It makes me smile to imagine the Lord Himself taking a breath after He had been dead for days. I wish I could see it happen and take in the moment that happened so far from human eyes. While the world was hustling and moving, He was breathing in the forgiveness and restoration that God had promised. He did what He was sent to do and endured the separation that brought us union with His Father. Somewhere in the dark of night, there was a breath that welcomed Him back into this life. I think we can sometimes get so accustomed to hearing a story that we fail to really take in the reality of it. Given the complexity and mystery of all that happened in Christ's death and resurrection, that has to be true. These accounts in Scripture are meant to compel us to not only communicate the events as they occurred, but also to worship - to be swept off our feet in sheer adoration for the Father who rejoiced to breathe life into us. Do you see Him this way? Many years ago, Moses asked God to show him His glory, and I can't help but think that sometimes we miss the glory for lack of asking. I'm not talking about asking Him for signs or answers, but simply to leave us awestruck and on our knees in true recognition of His holiness. Lord, show us Your glory...

Remember...

We would love to have another collection of Scriptures and meditations for a Garden Devotional next year. If you have anything at all you would like to contribute, your own experiences of God communing with you in His garden, insights you are willing to share from your own studies, favourite devotionals or poems or prayers that God has used to speak to you of Himself and His goodness, then please send them to us! We'd love to try to make this a yearly collection, so as soon as anything comes to mind, please send it to discipleship@brookswoodbaptist.com or give it to Bethany. We'll collect all year and review submissions as we go (and if you want support on the writing side, Bethany will be glad to help!)

One last thing before we go: If our Father has spoken anything to your heart through this devotional, remember it and treasure it. Give yourself reminders where you will see them. Incorporate whatever it is into your daily life as much as possible. There will always be more readings and devotionals and content galore - but the Word of God is precious. Take it to heart. It is good for your soul. Our Father gives good gifts to His children (Matthew 7:11)

God bless and keep you. See you in church <3