

Seeds and Trees

Written by Andy Frost



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Inspire a faith that lasts



Introduction

Children are like sponges. They have this incredible capacity to absorb the world around them, learning from every new word, sight, smell and everything else that they experience. As their parents and carers, we are the biggest influence on them as they are growing up, and we have an amazing opportunity to help them grow in every season of their lives.

We can plant seeds of faith, cultivate the soil they are planted in and ensure that they are continually watered, praying that God helps their roots go deep, and makes them grow in their relationship with him. We long to see our children grow into strong trees planted by living water.

This devotional series is designed to explore how we plant those seeds, being equipped as we are refreshed in our own walk with God. Read one a week, and reflect over

the following days how you can make the practical ideas work for you and your family. There's an idea for you to try out with your children too, as you plant those seeds in their lives.

I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow.

1 Corinthians 3:6

About the author



Andy is the Director of Share Jesus International, and a speaker for Care for the Family. He is an author who has written books including *Long Story Short* and *Losing Faith - Those Who Have Walked Away*. He heads up the London Mission Collective and is a Methodist local preacher and member of the Evangelical Alliance Council. He has an MA in Applied Theology. Andy is married to Jo and they have two young daughters.



Inspire a faith that lasts

The Kitchen Table Project is a growing movement of mums, dads and carers joining together to support each other, learn from each other and share ideas, so we call all succeed in inspiring faith in our homes. Sign up at kitchentable.org.uk/join to receive a monthly email of encouragement, inspiration and ideas and follow us on Facebook @ktpcampaign.

Planting

The power of seeds



Read

Luke 8:1-15



Reflect

Dwarfed in the palm of your hand, they seem so small and insignificant. Yet we all know that both the shooting sunflower and the towering oak tree start out as seeds.

Jesus was an expert storyteller. He connected with a rural population, who knew what it was to tend the fields, and masterfully communicated deep spiritual truths in simple language they understood. Not only that, but his stories have transcended time and cultures, and continue to speak directly into ours and our families' lives almost two thousand years on.

The seed

In the parable of the sower, Jesus explains that the harvest is dependent on two huge factors. The first is the seed.

Luke explains that the seed is the "word of God" (v11). Now it might seem strange that Jesus refers to the word of God as a seed. The simple seed looks small and insignificant, but it is in fact powerful. It is laden with potential. The seed has the capacity for life and the power of transformation. In the same way, the word of God has the power to give us life.

The first challenge for us as parents that stems from this passage is: How are we, like the sower, sowing the truths of God into our children's lives? How are we affirming their identity in God and how

The seed is the word of God

Luke 8:11

much they are loved by their heavenly Father?

What's interesting is that the farmer seems to be pretty bad at sowing. The sower seems to be scattering seeds all over the place, with seeds landing on the path, among the rocks and amongst the weeds as well as in the good soil. An encouraging thought here, is that when we are sowing the word of God into our children's lives, we don't need to be meticulous and perfect in our seed sowing. Instead we can generously sow God-truths at any and every opportunity.

The soil

The second factor that impacts the harvest is the soil. Jesus describes three different bad soils and he goes on to explain to his disciples what the soils represent. The seed that falls on the path and is eaten by the birds, represents the spiritual truths that we sow that are not understood. The seeds that fall amongst the rocky ground are unable to take root and when times become hard, they fall away. The seeds sown amongst the thorns represent the faith that is choked by life's worries and pleasures.

But then there's the good soil. In Palestine today, a good soil would produce ten times what is sown, and a bumper crop would produce a thirty or forty times increase. But in the good soil that Jesus is talking about, the crop is one hundred

times what was sown. This was an abundant harvest!

The second challenge for us as parents, is what kind of a soil can we help cultivate in the home so that the seeds of faith produce an extravagant harvest? Research shows that where children feel safe, loved and accepted, there is a greater chance that their faith will grow. Just as the soil type affects the harvest, so the environment we create at home affects how faith is nurtured in the home.

So this week, as we reflect upon this ancient parable, let's look for opportunities to scatter seeds, to sow the truths of God into the everyday. But let's also remember the importance of what we're already doing, in creating homes where our children know they are loved unconditionally.



As a family

Find some time this week to specifically tell your children that you love them, and show them too! Be specific and build them up telling them the parts of their character that you especially love.

Maybe have a meal together and ask everyone to say one thing they love about each member of the family. Then remind them that their father in Heaven loves them even more.

Proximity

Close to Jesus



Read

Psalms 1:1-3



Reflect

The Psalms contain some beautiful poetic imagery. Psalm 1 describes someone who is blessed like "a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither" (v3).

There are certain Biblical images that I find it easy to picture. When I close my eyes, I can picture this tree. The tree is big and strong with its roots disappearing into the luscious green grass beneath. The tree's leaves are a rich tapestry of green and its shadow covers the river bank, providing shade as the water cascades by.

The psalmist understood that trees need a continual source of water for life to flourish. Being situated by a river, the leaves would not wither, and fruit would come naturally in season with an abundant life-source on tap.

Where are you planted?

Seeds can't choose where they are planted, but we can. To a certain degree we can choose where we will live and how we will parent our children, but more importantly we can choose how we will live. Psalm 1 gives some wisdom about how we should position ourselves, by encouraging us both what not to do and in contrast what we should do.

The psalmist warns us not to walk, to stand or to sit with the ungodly. This doesn't mean we should desert our friends and family who don't share our faith, but

Blessed is the one ... whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season

Psalms 1:1-3

is a reminder not to get lost in the wisdom of the age. Some Biblical scholars talk of a progression from walking to standing to sitting, drawing upon the idea that what begins with walking with ungodly wisdom can lead to standing with those on a path away from the things of God, to ultimately sitting and criticising the wisdom of God.

In contrast the author encourages us to delight in the law of God. In context, the psalmist is talking about the first five books of the Bible. But today, we get to delight in the sweeping narrative of the Bible and ultimately, in the person of Jesus. And the instruction is not just to read but to meditate, to make space to reflect upon the promises of God, night and day.

We have a choice about how we will be planted and if we long for our children to discover the promises of God for themselves, then we are invited to position ourselves, to be like the tree in this psalm. It begins with an intentional desire on our part, to punctuate our lives with the promises of God and to dwell upon who God is and what it means to be in relationship with him.

It might be about cultivating existing devotional patterns or it may be about creating a new habit of reading a Bible verse over lunch, or by reading a Bible story with our kids at night. If we want to be like this tree, we don't need to move

to live by a river, but we do need to be intentional about positioning ourselves closer to Jesus, who said "the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:14).

Being planted close to Jesus means that there will be fruit and that God will prosper us, not always with a long night's sleep and healthy bank balances, but he will bring something good and wonderful out of even the tough life circumstances we go through. Let's choose to meditate on the things of God this week.



As a family

Try memorising a verse together and practice it each day. You could choose a verse together, or we really like these ones as good starting points:

Proverbs 3:5

*Trust in the LORD with all your heart.
Never rely on what you think you know.*
(Good News Translation)

Galatians 5:22-23

But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things!
(New Living Translation)

Ephesians 4:32

Be kind and loving to each other, and forgive each other just as God forgave you in Christ.
(New Century Version)

Influence

In the raw and the real



Read

Luke 19:1-10



Reflect

I love the story of Zacchaeus. I imagine him looking a bit like Danny DeVito with a fair amount of bling around his neck. I have often re-told the story to children from various perspectives. From the viewpoint of people in the crowd, as Jesus reaches out to the despised tax collector. I have told the story from the point of view of Zacchaeus as he struggles to see over the crowd and opts to climb the tree to glimpse Jesus. And I have told the story from the viewpoint of Jesus as he stops beneath the tree and calls Zacchaeus by name. He knows his name!

But I have also told the story from the viewpoint of the tree. A seed had been sown many years earlier and the tree was now able to support a fully grown man, in his finest clobber, as he climbs up the branches to find a perch for himself.

Whichever perspective I tell the story from, the emotion in this passage is so apparent; the anger and bemusement of the crowd; the compassion of Jesus; and the embarrassment that I imagine Zacchaeus felt (fully grown men in first century Israel didn't run, let alone climb trees!).

Stories that are rich in emotion give us a sense of the raw and the real.

A transformed life

The name Zacchaeus means 'righteous one,' a name that Zacchaeus had failed to live up to. As I reflect upon this story, it reminds me of the words that have been spoken over my life - the expectations from teachers and friends and family. The expectations that can, at times, become overburdening.

But it's in these short few verses that we see the transformation of Zacchaeus from a man that is hated by the crowd for his compliance with Rome and his money grabbing success, to a man who has encountered Jesus, had his world turned upside down and has become generous to the point of bankruptcy.

Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham."

Luke 19:9

In these short few verses Zacchaeus' core identity is changed as he is defined in his new relationship with Jesus.

This story is real in the way Zacchaeus' greed, selfishness and his failings are not edited out of the story. This story is real in the way Zacchaeus chooses to position himself to get a glimpse of Jesus, making himself vulnerable. This story is real in the way Jesus knows Zacchaeus' name and meets him where he's at, as a 'sinner' up a tree.

Salvation has come to this house

Perhaps one of the most staggering phrases in this passage is in the words of Jesus: "Today salvation has come to this house" (v9). Zacchaeus, who has had considerable influence in his community as a chief tax collector, also has influence in his home. His family saw the reality of the transformation in his life as he started to live generously, and they are impacted by the decision he has made to follow in the way of Jesus.



As a family

Read the story of Zacchaeus together. Maybe you can act it out – if you're brave try climbing trees! Or maybe your child still fits on your shoulders! Make it fun, but chat about how God has forgiven some of the things you've done wrong. Share an example that you could do the opposite of. Perhaps if you were unkind to somebody, then find someone to be extra kind to. What an opportunity to grow in faith together as a family.

Connect

Abide in the vine

Read



John 15:1-17



Reflect

Jesus is the vine. The simplicity of this passage is that no branch can create fruit by itself. It must remain connected to the vine.

We are the branches. Each branch, whilst connected to the vine, has this amazing capacity to bear fruit. According to this chapter, a life well-lived is a fruitful life. It's about each of us remaining in Jesus, being transformed in character and exercising our God-given gifts over the years of our lives, representing Jesus. But we're also told that if we do not remain in Jesus, then we will not be fruitful.

So how do we remain in Jesus, the true vine?

Abide

The term 'abide' is used in this passage and has three connotations. Firstly, it's about a two-way connection with Jesus as we connect with him and as he, by his Spirit, lives in us. Secondly, it's about being dependent on Jesus. As the branch receives water, minerals, and nutrients from the vine, so we are aware of our dependence on Jesus. And thirdly, it's about longevity. It's about choosing to be connected to the true vine for the long haul.

Very practically, abiding in Jesus is about meditating on his words (v7), obediently following him (v10) and simply remaining in his love (v9-10). And it's this theme of

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."

John 15:5

love that Jesus goes on to unpack as he commands his disciples to "Love each other" (v17).

When you see a vine with its many branches and bunches of grapes, you see this analogy in action. It's incredible how many branches can connect with the vine. In the same way, we as individual Christians are not lone branches but part of something much bigger. As Christians, we are connected to the one true vine, Jesus. As the disciples were called to love one another almost two thousand years ago, so we today, as his Church, are called to love one another.

Part of our role as parents, as we look to inspire faith in our children, is to make them aware that they are part of something much bigger. When we abide in Jesus, we become part of his Church, his family. A practical challenge is around how we can help our kids feel that they belong to the Church.

The good news for me from this passage of Scripture is that it is a reminder again that passing on the baton of faith is not ultimately our responsibility. The word for 'gardener' is better translated vinedresser - a person who prunes, trains, and cultivates vines. It is God who prunes us to be more fruitful. We do not have to concoct clever strategies and worry about processes. Our role as parents is ultimately about abiding in Jesus, belonging to his Church and partnering with God in helping our children know him.



As a family

Plan a picnic with a group of people from church. It might be another family, or some older grandparent figures. But take some time together to help your children know that they are part of God's family – and that we're all connected to the true vine. Abide in Jesus together!

Legacy

United in prayer



Read

Psalm 133



Reflect

"Amen." As I pray with my kids just before school or as I tuck them in at night, we often utter this word at the end. It simply means, 'so be it.' More than just helping us know when a prayer is coming to an end, it is an opportunity to agree with the prayers of others. It is an expression of unity.

Over the past four weeks, we have been exploring how we can sow seeds of faith in the lives of our children. We have looked at the power of the home to cultivate a seedbed for faith. We have looked at how we can be intentional in planting ourselves close to Jesus. We have looked at the importance of being real and the influence we can have as we share our journey of faith. And we have looked at how we need to help our children discover the true vine, and what it means to belong to his family, the Church.

Intertwined amongst all these ideas is the importance of prayer. Prayer is pivotal.

Today's psalm looks specifically at unity, with that often quoted verse: "How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!" (v1). This psalm, written by King David, is one of the 'psalms of ascent' that was sung as pilgrims ascended the road to Jerusalem to attend festivals. It would have been sung as people from across the nation gathered on their pilgrimage - young and old, rich and poor - reminding them that they were family.

The use of the word "good" suggests being pleasing to God, while "pleasant" has the connotation of being pleasing to us. Some things are good but not pleasant and some things are pleasant but not good, but unity is both good and pleasant.

And then we are given two beautiful instagrammable pictures of unity.

The first is the picture of oil running down Aaron's beard. Oil was refreshing in the dry and dusty climate. And this was not just any oil but precious oil, suitable for anointing a priest (Exodus 30:22-33). And it was poured in abundance, running from the head, through the beard and down onto the collar of Aaron's robes. As the High Priest, Aaron's robe would have had the names of the twelve tribes of Israel sewn into it (Exodus 28:12). The image here is of the oil cascading down, bringing refreshment on the people of God.

*How good and pleasant it
is when God's people live
together in unity!*

Psalm 133:1

The second image is the dew from Mount Hermon falling on Mount Zion. Mount Hermon, in the north, was the highest mountain in Israel, where dew was common. In contrast, Mount Zion is where Jerusalem and the temple were situated. It was a tiny mountain in comparison and was located in the southern part of Israel receiving very little dew, especially in the summer. The picture here, is of the cool and refreshing dew of Mount Hermon refreshing the hot and dry Mount Zion. And again the fact that Hermon in the north and Zion in the south are connected in this psalm, paints a picture of unity.

This week, we remember that it is not just about what we can practically do as parents to pass on faith but fundamentally, we need to be praying for our children. This can seem like a solitary task but this psalm is a reminder to invite others to unite with us and pray.

Both of these vivid images in this psalm remind us firstly that blessing comes from above. The oil and the dew symbolise the Holy Spirit. The same word is translated as 'running down' in regard to the oil, and 'falling' in regard to the dew, showing us that ultimately all blessings come from God and that we need to keep our eyes set on him. And secondly, these images remind us that God gives his blessing where there is unity. So let's invite others - grandparents, uncles and aunts, church grannies and youth workers, to partner with us in praying for our children - in lifting one great mighty Amen!



As a family

Come together as a family to pray this week. Maybe just for five minutes, but pray for each of you, including adults, that you would all be growing closer to God and would follow him all the days of your lives.

You could make it fun by blowing bubbles up to heaven each time someone prays, or batting a ball as your prayer for God to catch.



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