
- Read John 9:1-34. “I was blind, but now I see.” Why are these words, echoed in the hymn, *Amazing Grace*, so significant to Christians today? What do these words say to us? Are all of us, at some point in our lives, blind to the truth of Jesus Christ? What permits us to finally “see” that truth? What impact does that understanding have on our lives? Does our own understanding ever positively impact the lives of others?

- Read Philippians 3:4-14. Paul gave up (or “sold”) everything in order to acquire Christ and his kingdom! Furthermore, Paul considered his much-admired former life as worthless in comparison to Christ. Be honest: have you “risen” to this point in your faith life, so as to consider everything else as comparatively worthless? Can we expect to achieve this attitude overnight? How do we go about becoming so transformed in our thinking and feeling? How can we express our gratitude to God for the transformation we have already felt?

- Read Matthew 13:44-46. What is the kingdom of heaven that Jesus is talking about? Why would it be a great treasure? Why should we want others to acquire it as well? What do we have to “sell” or give up to acquire it? How can we more continually experience the joy of Christ’s kingdom in our lives?

FOR ADDITIONAL INSIGHT

AGRICULTURE IN THE HOLY LAND

Agriculture in Israel is a highly developed industry: Israel is a major exporter of fresh produce and a world-leader in agricultural technologies despite the fact that the geography of Israel is not naturally conducive to agriculture. More than half of the land area is desert, and the climate and lack of water resources do not favour farming. Only 20% of the land area is naturally arable. Today agriculture represents 2.5% of total GDP and 3.6% of exports.

While agricultural workers make up only 3.7% of the work force, Israel produces 95% of its own food requirements, supplementing this with imports of grain, oil seeds, meat, coffee, cocoa and sugar. Israel is home to two unique types of agricultural communities, the kibbutz and moshav, which developed as Jews from all over the world immigrated to the country and embarked on a pioneering enterprise.

Modern agriculture developed in the late nineteenth century, when Jews began settling in the land. They purchased land which was mostly semi-arid, although much had been rendered untillable by deforestation, soil erosion and neglect. They set about clearing rocky fields, constructing terraces, draining swampland, reforesting, counteracting soil erosion, and washing salty land. Since independence in 1948, the total area under cultivation has increased from 408,000 acres (1,650 km²) to 1,070,000 acres (4,300 km²), while the number of agricultural communities has increased from 400 to 725. Agricul-

tural production has expanded 16 times, three times more than population growth.

Water shortage is a major problem. Rain falls between September and April, with an uneven distribution across the country, from 28 inches (70 cm) in the north to less than 2 inches (5 cm) in the south. Annual renewable water resources are about 5.6 billion cubic feet (160,000,000 m³), of which 75% of which is used for agriculture. Most of Israel's freshwater sources have been consequently joined to the National Water Carrier, network of pumping stations, reservoirs, canals and pipelines which transfers water from the north to the south.

CROPS

Due to the diversity of the land and climate across the country, Israel is able to grow a wide range of crops. Field crops grown in the country include wheat, sorghum and corn. On 215,000 hectares of land, these sorts of crops are grown, 156,000 hectares of which are winter crops. Fruit and vegetables grown include citrus, avocados, kiwifruit, guavas and mangoes from orchards located on the Mediterranean coastal plain. Tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers and zucchini are grown commonly throughout the country, whilst melons are grown during winters months in the valleys. Subtropical areas in the country produce bananas and dates, whilst in the northern hills apples, pears and cherries are grown. Furthermore, grape vineyards are found across the country, as the country's wine industry has developed to become a world-player.

EMBRACE & ENGAGE

This week, "cultivate" the soil of your faith by reading the Bible every day. "Till" the soil of your faith by discussing what you read at least once, with at least one other person. "Water" your soil by praying for understanding. Provide "sunshine" to your soil by attending church on Sunday (even though it is online). Did the seeds of faith take root? Next week, share with the group whatever you experienced.

SUGGESTED PRAYER

Heavenly Father, thank you for the transforming effect Jesus' powerful parables have had on millions of lives, including many of ours. Bless us, and help us grow into people who can share your power with everyone our lives touch. May the strength of your Word become the lifeblood that runs through our veins. In Jesus' name, Amen.

DAILY READINGS

MONDAY - MATTHEW 13:1-9, 18-23

Fishing was one key “industry” around the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus told this story from a boat just offshore. Agriculture was another. It’s quite likely that on a nearby hillside, in plain sight of Jesus’ hearers, a farmer was hand-casting seed on a field. What kind of a crop the seed produced, Jesus said, depended on what kind of soil the seed landed on.

- What kind of soil are you—how do you respond to God’s word? Do you “get” what you read in the Bible? Scholar N. T. Wright said, “This takes time, and sometimes hard work. A quick glance at the Bible, an occasional sitting in church or a study group and being entertained by some new idea, is probably not enough. Care and thought needs to be put into the task of hearing the word of the kingdom until it has taken proper root.”

- Farmers on Galilee’s rocky hills could never be sure every seed would land on good soil and grow. But they kept planting—it was the only way to have a crop. Jesus, too, was sad when people didn’t accept his message (see Luke 19:41), but he kept on “sowing seed.” Who do you share Jesus with, verbally or as a silent witness? What kinds of “soil” are they? How do you make what you share “good news” rather than “good advice”?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for those who’ve planted the seed of your kingdom in my life. Teach me how to discern when to speak, and when to silently let your love shine through me to others. Amen

TUESDAY - 2 SAMUEL 11:26-12:13

Jesus used parables a lot, but he didn’t invent this way of teaching. Greek culture (which has shaped many of our ways of thinking) used analysis and definitions; Hebrew teachers liked stories better. When King David lost his way morally (the whole sad story is in 2 Samuel 11), Nathan the prophet used a parable to deftly show the king how he had abused his power, and led him to repent.

- Nathan the prophet bravely spoke “truth to power” to a Middle Eastern monarch! His parable invited King David to, essentially, judge himself. When have you gotten insight into yourself from a Biblical story, a sermon illustration or a life observation? How can stories sometimes reach your heart when lectures don’t get through?

- When the truth hit home, David said, “I’ve sinned against the Lord!” Nathan replied, “The Lord has removed your sin ... you won’t die.” What is your emotional “heart-health” today? When ‘truth hits home for you, are you able to turn to Jesus and let him heal your spirit, restore your connection and strengthen you to live with the consequences?

Prayer: Lord, when you show me that “I am that person!” grow in me a heart like David’s. Help me bravely, trustingly own up and turn to you for healing. Thank you for your grace, and for a fresh start each day. Amen

WEDNESDAY - MATTHEW 13:10-17

Some people think these verses say Jesus used parables to obscure his message. No—Isaiah 6:9-10, which Jesus quoted, did not say what God wanted, but stated hyperbolically how people were responding. In Isaiah’s and Jesus’ day, some hearers had closed minds. No matter how much they listened, they wouldn’t hear. But Jesus’ parables “stuck,” working away in their hearts and minds toward an “ah-ha” moment of clarity. As they reflected on the stories, those whose hearts were open began to see that God was at work just as prophets and righteous people had dreamed of for centuries.

- Author Michael Green quotes Prof. C. F. D. Moule as saying, “You can’t teach by spoon feeding. You must let people puzzle it out for themselves.” How does this suggest at least one reason Jesus used parables? When have you understood Jesus’ message more deeply by wrestling with some part of it yourself rather than having someone else hand you an answer?

- There was nothing arbitrary about Jesus’ saying that “those who have will receive more ... as for those who don’t have, even the little they have will be taken away from them” (verse 12). Muscles that are used grow; left idle, they wither away. In what ways have you found yourself “receiving more” as you intentionally develop your spiritual “muscles”?

Prayer: Jesus, you came to bring light and life. Guide me as I continue learning how to live into the life you offer, how to stretch myself and grow in the atmosphere of your grace. Amen

THURSDAY - JOHN 9:1-34

Yesterday (Matthew 13:10-17), we read Jesus words on spiritual blindness. Today, we see them in action, and we also see Jesus, “the light of the world,” bringing new vision into life. The whole town (verses 8-10) knew this man had been blind. But their preconceived ideas about Jesus blinded the religious leaders. When the formerly blind man said, “Do you want to become his disciples too?” the story became almost comical—except, of course, for the ugly abuse of power that followed.

- A key word in this story is “know.” The uneducated beggar, blind from birth, knew just one thing (in words John Newton used in the hymn Amazing Grace), “I was blind and now I see.” As you reflect on your spiritual journey with God, how has your outlook, your heart, gradually changed? What areas can you identify where you once were blind—but now you see?

- The religious leaders accused the man of lying (verse 18), they insulted him (verse 28), they called him a sinner (verse 34), and “they expelled him” (verse 34). What danger signals can this sad story raise for us if we deal with disagreements with tactics like these? How do you use whatever power you hold over others? How do you treat yourself at difficult times?

Prayer: Lord God, open my eyes, open my heart. Give me a willingness to see the world as you see it, and the courage to live in accordance with the vision you give me. Amen

FRIDAY - MATTHEW 13:44-46

In both of these stories, a person found a rare, precious item. Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven, his kingdom, was like those very precious things. In each story, the finder urgently sold everything in order to gain the more valuable thing he'd found. The stories were about being alert to see the treasure others missed, and making it the top priority after finding it.

- Have you ever found a great buy at a sale, or some money lying on the ground, or a truly beautiful flower or scene to photograph? When have you had a similar excitement while studying your Bible, seeing God in a child's face, or finding the unforced rhythms of God's grace in your life? How can you stay alert to that?

- In these two parables, Jesus taught that, as citizens of the kingdom of heaven, we get to have an experience like the treasure finders'. We get to experience new joy, new motivation and purpose in life, new values and focus. Is your experience of Jesus' kingdom more and more one of joy, or duty? Of being set free, or just more rules to follow? What value do you place on being part of Jesus' kingdom?

Prayer: O God, because you are who Jesus said you are, and you love me the way Jesus said you do, you are worth more than anything else could possibly be. Help me to make you my top priority, to seek you with all my heart. Amen.

SATURDAY - PHILIPPIANS 3:4-14

Jesus said his kingdom is like a treasure, a pearl of amazing value and beauty (Matthew 13:44-46). The apostle Paul wrote this stirring picture of what that looks like in a human life. He had fine rabbinic training (Acts 22:3), and was evidently on Jerusalem's highest council at a young age (Acts 26:10, 8:1-3). But once he met Christ, he said, all the human credentials and successes lost their meaning. He turned his talent and vast energy to pursuing one goal above all others: "the prize of God's upward call in Christ Jesus."

- At one time, Paul felt that his "assets" were so valuable that God would have to approve of him, and be awed to have him "on the team." (See the Pharisee's prayer in Luke 18:11-12.) That was what he'd given up. In its place, he'd found a life that wasn't built on impressing others, but on accepting God's wonderfully levelling gift of grace. What freedom have you found in choosing Christ's love as your greatest treasure? In what ways can making that the defining value of your life transform you into a "city on a hill," a beacon drawing others to Jesus?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, it can be such hard work worrying about how I "rank" against other people. Help me to "forget about the things behind me, and reach out for the things ahead of me." Strengthen me for the journey, Lord. Amen.