

Cultivate Your Garden

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Date: 13 July 2025

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[0 : 00] All right, good morning. The kids are all on their way. If you were here last week, you're probably feeling a lot more at ease. Life is normal. I'm up here at a safe distance and we're all spread out, so, but you never know when I might get the urge to pull you back together to pray together.

So just be prepared because that is important. I want to start out this morning talking about gardens, which will actually come into play as we go into our passage in Mark.

So, I'm not a gardener. I worked at a nursery for several seasons and the staff learned that if I was to pull orders, they would just tell me the general shape of the flower and the color because I could never remember the names.

I have a hard time with my children's names. All the flowers in the nursery was more than I can handle. And the reason that is, I think, is because I was scarred as a child. My grandfather, when we moved to Colorado from Chicago when I was seven, and my grandfather built a house and he started working on a garden.

The ground was so hard, they rented a rototiller. It would have been easier to rototill the concrete driveway. It just bounced right across the surface. So my uncle, who was 17 or 18 at the time, got a pitchfork and he thought he'd loosen the soil.

[1 : 17] He twisted that thing like it had been melted. I mean, it was just a mess. So, I don't know how they overcame. That was above my pay grade. But finally, they got the soil broken down.

We hauled in truckload after truckload after truckload of manure. Can you imagine seven, six, and five-year-old boys rolling in manure all day? It's gross.

So we got my grandfather's garden bed all done. He got his plants in there. And I still remember, got to be about mid-May. We had plants that were about this tall. I heard rumors of vegetables like I'd never tasted before in my life.

Well, one of the things you learned living in Colorado, that May is the season of heartbreak. And a storm came through and dropped hail over about a 15-minute period that leveled that beautiful garden down to mush.

And there were no vegetables that year. Anybody relate to that story? Had that sort of, that type of experience? Maybe even this last week with the, that torrential rain we had earlier in the week.

[2 : 22] That was wild. But, so I thought, wow, gardening, I think that's more work than it's worth. But, my grandfather proved me wrong over time. We did have some really great gardens. Never had tomatoes like my grandfather's tomatoes.

They were delicious. And we learned how to mitigate the damage of the hailstorms. But they would come occasionally. Now, that takes us back to the original garden, the Garden of Eden. Because those of you who are gardeners, and I've learned since we've been in Iowa that that's just about all of you, that you're actually exercising what God designed in you from creation.

He put us in a garden. He put our forefathers in the garden. Because that is the context in which God wants us to live. Literally and figuratively.

He's given us a place where we can have dominion. A place that we can thrive. A place that we can multiply. Be fruitful and multiply was his command. So, that's where humanity began was in the Garden of Eden.

So, the covenant between God and Adam was you're in this garden. Be fruitful and multiply. Cultivate it.

[3 : 33] Bear fruit and thrive. And that's the word I want you to remember. As we think about the garden. Under us exercising God's plan for our lives under the direction of the Lord himself.

Is thrive. That is God's will. And we're going to come back to that. So, open your Bibles to Mark chapter 8. If you recall, excuse me, if you recall last week.

I'm going to move this because it feels like I'm going to get jabbed in my ear. If you remember last week we had two major themes in the first part of this conversation.

So, if you recall, Jesus was out with the disciples. He was walking from Bethsaida up to Caesarea Philippi. And he wanted that time to have a specific conversation with the disciples again.

And he asked them, who do the people say that I am? And the answer was wrong. And then he said, who do you say that I am? And Peter said the right words with the wrong meaning. He said, you are the Christ.

[4 : 40] And if you look in the parallel passage in Matthew, Jesus said, yes, that's right. Don't tell anybody. Why? Because Jesus knew that Peter didn't really understand what it meant.

But Jesus' identity is very, very important. It's very important for us to understand the passage that we're going to talk about today. So, look at Mark 8 and verse 31.

And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed and after three days rise again.

Son of Man was a very common way for Jesus to refer to himself. And when he was, he was making a statement, I'm the Messiah. And he was looking back to Daniel chapter 7 specifically, which is a prophecy of the triumphant king.

So, when Jesus opened his explanation by saying, the Son of Man pointing to himself, Peter said, yeah, I thought I had that right. But then he talks about rejection and suffering and death.

[5 : 50] Wait a minute. Wait a minute. That's not in Daniel 7. And so, it created confusion for Peter. And so, he pulls Jesus aside and rebukes Jesus.

And Jesus, in turn, rebukes him and says, get behind me, Satan. Get behind me, you adversary. And we talked about the fact that that was either Jesus just saying, you are distracting me from my mission.

You're tempting me to avoid the cross. Or he was truly addressing Satan, speaking through Peter. And I think both are true. But what he addressed to Peter was the second major theme from our talk last week.

Was that we tend to focus on man's interests, like Peter, when we should be focused on God's interests. God's plan. Now, if you remember, too, this is the last piece of review.

Very important. Is that in the Old Testament, there were two paths, two chains, if you will, of prophecy about the coming Messiah. And it created some confusion.

[6 : 59] One was the triumphant king. And, of course, the first century Jews really liked that one. Because they thought that the Messiah was going to come and he was going to kick butt and take names, get rid of the Romans and put the Jews on the throne. That's a good, I like that one.

But the other was a suffering Messiah. And reconciling the two was very difficult. Peter obviously didn't like that second one. And what we talked about last week is we need both.

We have to go through the path of the suffering Messiah to be ready for the coming of the triumphant king. Because we're not ready. Do you remember that? We're not ready to be under the reign of the king.

He wants, his interest is to be king, the rightful king of everything he's made. To be working with subjects who are submitted to him, who are obedient to him, who are enthusiastic about what he's doing in the world.

And we're not ready. Because sin had to be dealt with by the suffering Messiah. The wrath of God was directed at us as a race and as individuals for our disobedience.

[8 : 08] The suffering Messiah had to come in order to deal with that sin. And then he would prepare a people for the return of the triumphant king. And we would be ready to serve with him.

And the path between the suffering servant and the triumphant king is what we're going to talk about today. So that's God's interest. Man's interest, I want the king.

I want my world to be made right. I'm not healthy, I want to be healed. Now. I'm not happy with my marriage, I want that fixed. Now. My job is terrible, fix that now.

I don't like the president, I want that fixed now. You can fill in the blanks. We've got all these trials and tribulations in life and we want the king to come along and fix them.

After all, Jesus, isn't that why you came? But the problem is, we're saying we want you to be king, but to do it our way. So what we really want is a servant who will answer our needs.

[9 : 07] And that's what Jesus was saying to Peter in correcting him. Your interests are in the wrong place. You are pursuing man's interests instead of God's.

And this morning we're going to reconcile those two and see how God changes our hearts so that our interests become his interests. Which is in our best interest. So let's pray together and then we'll get into Mark chapter 8.

The last part of the chapter. Father, thank you that you love us first of all. That you, that you love us to such a degree that you sent your son to die for us.

Help us to always keep that at the front of our minds. There was no sacrifice that you were willing to endure to win us to yourself.

To change us. To make us your willing subjects. And not just subjects, but friends. And not just friends, but children. And fellow heirs with Christ. God, help us to remember that.

[10 : 12] Help us to keep our minds focused on the reality of your love for us. That you are trustworthy. That you are a good God. Because there are times in our lives that that, it just doesn't feel that way.

And we need to come back to this place of remembering that you're good. That you love us. And that you sent your son to solve the problem of our sin and our separation from you.

Lord, I pray as we look at what it means to be a follower of Jesus this morning. That together we would say yes and amen to what you want from our lives. That we would be obedient to you.

And discover that in obeying you, we are living the life that you intended us to live. God, I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. So last week, last little bit of review.

If you remember, I described one of the bookshelves in the office back there. I told you that I've got a section on discipleship that's probably anywhere from five to eight feet long. And I said, they're all wrong.

[11 : 12] Well, one thing you will learn about me over time is that I am occasionally prone to a bit of hyperbole. And that was one of those cases. They're not all wrong. They're actually mostly right.

There's a lot of good information there. I've learned a lot from reading those books and from interacting with the authors and the pages of those books. I've actually met a couple of them. And that's been beneficial too.

But there is a problem. And it's a pervasive problem, specifically around this verse and its parallel passages in the other gospels. Because I think the way we apply it is inaccurate.

And that inaccuracy is rooted in how we define and approach what it means to follow Jesus. So let's talk about where I think the inadequacy or the misunderstanding is.

First of all, we read this. Speaking of which, I should read the passage, shouldn't I? Start at verse 34. And Jesus summoned the crowd with his disciples and said to them, If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

[12 : 24] For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospels will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?

For what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of me, in my words, in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.

And Jesus was saying to them, Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power.

So let's talk about some of the misunderstandings in this passage. The first one I've seen often is Jesus is calling us to a new asceticism.

What's asceticism? It's becoming a monk or a nun. It's removing ourselves from the normal everyday life to focus on a life dedicated to God.

[13 : 27] And we wear odd-looking clothing that is uncomfortable by design. Some orders get weird haircuts. They do different outward things to demonstrate their devotion to God.

And even in the evangelical church, we kind of think of this, well, I just need to give up things. I'm going to give up a certain kind of movie. Or I'm going to give up fiction books.

Or I'm going to give up fill in the blanks. Fancy clothes. Whatever it is that you think God doesn't approve of. Right after I got saved at 14, I read a book called Total Discipleship.

I think it was the name of the book. And I was convicted. I had a growing library of science fiction and fantasy books. I got rid of all those books. And I think God was pleased with my heart. But as I matured, he said, you know, you really didn't need to get rid of those because there were some good books in there.

So I own most of them again. But I thought God was calling me to sacrifice. The problem is that becomes an end in itself. So that's one error. We step into a new asceticism.

[14 : 39] The other error is that this is a higher path. That this is for super saints. So if you're really going to follow Jesus, if you're really serious about God's calling in your life, well, you'll become a pastor.

Or you'll become a missionary. Or you'll go into some sort of full-time ministry. Again, there's nothing holy about what I do. There's nothing more, better way to put it, there's nothing more holy about my role as a pastor of this church than your role working wherever you work or working at home with your children.

All of these things are imbued with power by God's design if we're following him. But misunderstandings of this passage make it separate. Both of those views, there's either a call to asceticism, to sacrifice for its own sake, or to a life of especially devoted service to God, is ultimately defeating.

Because if that's not your call, well, why do I even bother? I guess I'll just read my Bible every once in a while and I'll listen to John preach and say an amen and shake his hand at the end and don't forget to write a check.

And that's the sum total of your Christian life. What I hope you see this morning is that's wrong.

[16 : 04] It's so much more than that. It's what God is going to teach us this morning is that the call to follow him is right where you are today. It's not giving things up.

Or it's not, it might be. But it's not giving things up for its own sake. Not super sainthood. You don't have to become Hudson Taylor or Mother Teresa. You can just be you where you're at.

So we want to be aware of those errors because they're easy to make. And a superficial reading of this passage would lead us down that path. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for my sake in the gospels will save it.

Verse 37, for what will a man give in exchange for his soul? Jim Elliot, who was martyred in Ecuador in the early 50s, said he is no fool to give what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.

Yes, that's true. Yes, that's true. And in Jim Elliot's case, it meant death. But that's not the case for all of us. Are you with me?

[17 : 09] I hope this is a hopeful message for you. I hope it's a, whew, great. If I'm going to follow Jesus, I don't have to quit my job. That's good. You might. You might. But it's not, it's not guaranteed.

Both of these errors are rooted in something we talked about in the sermon I gave two weeks ago on baptism. And alluded to again last week. And that's this division. Do you remember talking about the division that we've introduced in the evangelical church in America?

That you believe in Jesus, you check a box on a card, you pray a certain prayer, you go up at a certain kind of meeting, and you're saved.

And good for you, you're going to heaven. And we'd like you to do more, but that's enough. And then over here, if you're really serious, if you really understand what Jesus is calling you to, well, on this side, well, then you can decide to follow Jesus.

But that comes later. The call to discipleship and the call to salvation are separate. And what I will continually repeat to you is they're not separate.

[18 : 22] You cannot separate them biblically. The call to faith, to receive Jesus, the call to repentance for the kingdom of God is at hand, is to turn from belief in our own selves or the idols that we set up to solve the problems of life, turning from those sinful things and turning to a better thing that God has for us.

You may not understand it. I didn't at 14. But these things are not separate. They're together. We decide to, we believe in Jesus and demonstrate it by following him.

You with me? When we separate them, we get these errors. We want to avoid those errors. So, this is Jesus' path to restore his creation.

It's to bring us back to the garden. In the Chronicles of Narnia, the last book of the series is the last battle. It's the Revelation, if you will, the book of Revelation for Narnia.

And at the very end, sorry if you haven't read it, spoiler alert, if you haven't read it, the four main characters have died. They just don't know it. They're at the judgment. They meet Aslan, who is a picture of Jesus, and he ushers them into what looks like Narnia, but it's perfect.

[19 : 53] And up on a distant hill is a garden. And they know that's their home. That's what they've been calling for.

That's what they have been seeking all of their lives and not knowing it. That's a theme in C.S. Lewis' writing. That we are being called to something that's better, that we instinctively know is there.

And in Jesus, we enter into that place and our life is dedicated to getting there. And ultimately, we're back there in the presence of God, back in the garden.

It's the redemption of all of creation. That is God's ultimate aim, starting with us. Because remember, for him to be that triumphant king, we have to be prepared.

And that's what this is talking about this morning. First thing I want you to notice, verse 34. And Jesus summoned the crowd with his disciples and said to them.

[20 : 54] So up to that point, they had been walking. It doesn't say specifically, but I would assume that they had been walking. They finally got to Caesarea Philippi. Whenever Jesus stopped moving, crowds gathered. Jesus had been talking just to his disciples about his identity and about God's interest versus man's interest.

But now he gathers the crowd to talk with all of them. Why? It's pretty simple. This is an invitation to anybody who will.

Anybody. It's open. It's not for a select few. It's for all of them. And the other reason he drew the crowd is because the disciples had already made this decision. And now he's inviting others who were along for the ride.

They wanted free stuff. They heard that Jesus had fed the 5,000 and the 4,000. They saw people healed. And they heard rumors of Jesus healing. And they wanted some of that. And Jesus says, come on, gather around, come in close.

And I want to tell you what it means to follow me. So the invitation is open. It's open to everyone. It's open to everyone of us at all times to come in and follow him.

[22 : 00] So Jesus speaking, if anyone wishes to come after me, these are the ingredients to what it means to follow Jesus. Remember his call at the beginning of Mark, the beginning of Matthew to Peter, James, John, Matthew, the others, follow me and I will make you fishers of men.

Here in the midpoint of Mark, he's explaining it. The end of Mark, the end of Matthew is a great commission where he sends us out to do this work. Now he's going to tell them what that looks like.

Very concretely, very specifically. So here's the ingredients. The first one is deny yourself. I said this is the first one. Let me make something really clear.

These are not steps. This isn't linear. They happen simultaneously. We deny ourselves. We take up our cross. They happen together. It's a constantly, almost like a seesaw, but it's working together.

So deny yourself. Now remember, it's not a new asceticism. You're just not giving stuff up to give it up. It's not that. So what is it? Remember Jesus said to Peter, you are seeking after man's interests, not God's?

[23 : 16] We have this innate desire to fix things. Remember the covenant that God made with Adam? You're in this garden.

Be fruitful and multiply. Rule. Make it thrive. Well, we're wired that way. We still want to do that. But the problem is we want to do it our way in our time according to our design.

That's a problem. What Jesus is saying here is actually a lot deeper than just say no to whatever your favorite thing is because God doesn't want you to have any fun.

No, what he's actually saying to us is you need to deny these desires, your commitment to your way of doing things, and learn my way of doing things.

Because when you do, you will discover a new freedom. There is a very famous author by the name of Viktor Frankl. Frankl was in the concentration camps in Germany in World War II.

[24 : 22] And out of his experience, he wrote a book called Man's Quest for Meaning. And what he discovered was in the midst of the horror of the concentration camp, the Nazis could strip him of everything, everything, but one thing.

And that one thing was his choice. His ability to be inside of his own head and choose meaning in the midst of that horror. That's what the Lord is saying to us.

And in the midst of his working out what that meant, what he realized is as we say no to our base desires and pursue higher things, or in our context as Christians, as we seek God, we discover that as we say no to our basic desires and say yes to God's desires, we discover not restriction, but freedom.

Viktor Frankl, in the midst of the horror of the concentration camps, was actually freer than his guards, than his tormentors, because he was pursuing that higher way.

That's what God is calling us to do. Think of a toddler. A toddler gives into its every whim. Right?

[25 : 41] Those of you who have toddlers, you know. And if you oppose their will, they go crazy. They demand, I want what I want now.

But, and we look at that and we think, well, that's normal. But if that person's 35, or 55, or 75, is it normal anymore?

No. And if they continue to behave that way, are they free? Or are they actually slaves? They're slaves to their desires. We deny ourselves so that we can step into something better.

Does that make sense? You tracking with me? So that's the first ingredient. And then we take up our cross. We take up our cross.

We tend to take this to mean to step into suffering. God wants us to suffer. No. No, he does not.

[26 : 44] Jesus used the most powerful metaphor he could. And the context of that metaphor, the cross, the most heinous way of killing somebody.

That was his metaphor. But what's important to remember is we are to take up our cross. But the metaphor is not the cross so much as it is Jesus himself being willing to go to that length to pursue God's interests.

Because remember, this is about how to follow Jesus. And so it's not a call to suffering per se. We don't pursue suffering. When I was a student at Emmaus, one of my classmates got a job as a checker at Target.

And he thought that his calling, first and foremost above all else, was to share the gospel with everybody who came through his line. And he didn't do it subtly. He didn't do it in an abbreviated manner.

He gave him the whole Roman's road, soup to nuts, every time. So he had the slowest line. Everybody was frustrated. And he got fired. And he thought, I'm suffering for Jesus.

[27 : 58] One of the most powerful sermons I ever heard, Dave Glock, who was the dean at that time, because he wanted to use this as a teachable moment for all of us as students, said, that wasn't suffering for Jesus.

That was suffering for bad behavior. There's a time and a place. And Dave, that wasn't, the student's name happened to be Dave as well. That wasn't it. But we think that's what God's calling us to do, to make a spectacle of ourselves.

Or to step into something that we really don't like. No. It's a metaphor for pursuing where God wants you to go, to be what you want, what he wants you to be. Think of it this way.

Step into your garden. And let me define what that means. The garden was walled. It had a defined space. It wasn't the entire world. Adam had a specific area of responsibility that included the area that God defined.

It had to do with the plants and the animals that were in that garden. It had to do with taking care of his wife. And eventually it would lead to taking care of his children. And remember what I told you, remember, it was all about thriving under the rule of God.

[29 : 07] Working with God in partnership to make that garden grow and thrive. That's God's design for us. I would actually submit to you that not only is that God's design for us in this life, I think that's his design for us for eternity.

I think we're going to spend all of eternity in adventures with God, learning how, learning to embrace more fully his rule by working with him and discovering together all that he has made for us.

It says in Ephesians 2, it says in Ephesians 2, that we're going to spend all eternity learning about God's kindness for us. I think it's in the context of cultivating a garden. Your life is your garden.

Your spouse is part of your garden. Your job is your garden. Your children are your garden. And your job is their thriving.

You have been gifted with this garden to make it grow and thrive.

[30 : 14] And to see the fruit and to enjoy the fruit. Because God wants us to enjoy that fruit. We're made in his image.

He loves it when we do things right. And he, because he made us like him, wants us to experience that same joy. I'll give you an example that was just kind of cool this last week.

So, Kara and I, I've told some of you this story. Kara and I started a program in Colorado that was about leadership development at our camp out there, Camp Elam.

You might as well file that away in your mind because I'll refer to Camp Elam a lot. It really affected my life. But we started this program called Coworkers. And it was designed to take eighth to ninth grade students and prepare them for when they'd be old enough to be on staff.

And we, the whole theme was basically this idea of cultivating the garden. Your excellence honors God and let's teach you how to do that. Well, our second or third year we had this young woman who was in our program.

[31 : 20] And she was a very quiet girl and I wasn't even sure she was having any fun. Because I just couldn't get any feedback from her. And I'd quiz her occasionally and say, you all right? You having fun?

Yeah, I am. I'm having a great time. Tell your face. Well, then the week ended. She went her way. We went ours. Fast forward about six years.

We're back at camp doing a co-worker program again. And Shana comes up to me. She's a college, I think she was going into her senior year of college. And she said, John, I got to tell you something.

My fiancée and I, my fiancée and I are raising support to go to China as missionaries with Campus Crusade for Christ.

And the reason I want you to know that is I had no idea that God had a plan for my life and missions until I was in co-workers in ninth grade. That was the first place that I heard that God wanted to use me in a significant way in my life.

[32 : 25] Oh, that's cool. Thanks for sharing that with me. And it was, I thought there's fruit. And I've been telling that story for years because God let me see fruit of our ministry. Well, last week, I'm on Camp Elam's Facebook page and Shana and her husband are at camp and her oldest son was going through co-workers.

This was the 28th summer of co-workers. It was kind of sobering for me to realize that I'm old enough that we're on the second generation, that our co-worker kids now have co-worker kids.

They're going through it. Kind of tough to bear. But God wants us to see that. He lets us see the fruit of what we do as we cultivate our garden. This is the picture that God wants us to get.

Is that as we deny ourselves, as we say no to our way of doing things, like a toddler, and instead turn to God's way of doing things, we are unleashed to cultivate our garden, whatever that happens to be, and to make it thrive.

Now, if I ended the story there, and I did like I did last week and called you to pray together, the prayer would be good, and I want to encourage you to continually pray together, but I would be doing you a terrible disservice.

[33 : 54] Because everything I've told you is true. But there's an element that's missing. And this is the hard part. In the future, when we're in heaven with God, sin isn't a problem.

We will be like Jesus, it says in 1 John 3. We don't know what we will be like, but we do know that we will be like him because we will see him as he is.

But we have a garden now. And we are sinful. Each one of you, you know. You've got sin in your heart.

You're trying to solve problems your own way. You're not adequate to the needs that you're facing. We're finite. God is infinite. It's actually very freeing to me when I realized that I didn't have one problem, sin.

I had two problems. He said, how is that freeing? Well, I realized, I'm not God. I'm limited. Our limitations can drive us to sin, or they can drive us to God.

[34 : 57] But we have to embrace the fact we are not adequate. God has given us a garden that's more than we can handle. We are alone. But we have to step into it with him.

So there's sin. We have our own sin problems to deal with, and our own shortcomings. We're surrounded by people who are sinful. This may come as a shock, but my wife is a sinner.

No one ever doubts that I am, but people are often really care as a sinner. She's got a huge burden to bear in you, but... We're all sinful.

We all try to do things our own way. And God is calling us out of that in order to cultivate this garden that he's prepared for us. And the path to the triumphant king is the same path that Jesus trod as a suffering servant.

Through suffering, dealing with sin, to get to the promised land. If you remember several weeks ago, I talked about earlier in Mark chapter 8...

[36 : 11] Excuse me, Mark chapter 7, Jesus was talking about the heart. And we talked about the transformation of the heart happens in three tenses. It's positional. When we receive Christ as Savior, we are justified.

We are declared righteous. We're resurrected from death to life. It's an event. It's done. That's true. If you are in Christ, you were once dead and now you're alive.

And it's future. Where God's work in our lives will be completed. That verse I just quoted from 1 John 3. We will see him as he is. We will be transformed into his likeness.

Paul says in Romans 8 that we will be glorified. But in between, it's a process. It's a lifelong process. David wrote about it in Psalm 23.

For some reason, I always quote this in King James. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, thou art with me.

[37 : 19] It was a very important day in my life as a Christian when I realized that the promise, the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want at the beginning of that chapter, and the promise at the end of that chapter, surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, goes through always the valley of the shadow of death for all of us.

That's the life that we live. And each of us has something in our lives that is a burden that feels too much.

I've watched you. I've listened to some of you. I've prayed for your names that come up on the prayer list. There's the tragedy of death. There's a heart tragedy of increasingly more difficult life, of failing health, of cancer diagnosis, of just the burden that goes with living life.

It's jobs affected by the decisions that people make in Washington, and we have no control. It's children who are wayward. It's disharmony in our marriages.

We're in the valley of the shadow of death. That's your cross to bear. The reality is it would actually be easier to say, you know what?

[38 : 56] I just got a call from God. I'm leaving my spouse because I'm going to go be a missionary in China. No. Probably God's going to say, no, you're staying right where you are.

I'm sorry. But walk with me in it. We're never alone. We walk with God because that's what Jesus is telling us. If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.

We walk in the footsteps of Jesus. We follow his path. It's a daily battle. Romans 12 says, I urge you, therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living sacrifice.

And if you've heard a sermon on Romans, you've heard this illustration. What is true about a living sacrifice? It keeps crawling off the altar, and we got to put it back on. That is what we're doing literally every day is figuring out what does that mean?

To follow Jesus through the valley of the shadow of death, trusting that he is with us, that his rod and his staff comfort us, that he is preparing us a meal in the presence of our enemies.

[40 : 11] Every day we have to remind ourselves that this is true, and many days it doesn't feel like it.

But we have to keep looking to Jesus. We have to follow Jesus. And when we get off the path, one thing that's great about God is he's constant.

He always knows where he's at. You may be off wandering in the wilderness, but you know where he is and you can come back. And he welcomes us back. That's the story of the prodigal son.

He always welcomes us back. But we want to follow Jesus. So what does this mean practically for us? What does this mean? I don't have time this morning to go into the nuts and bolts.

In the future, we'll have sermons on the practice of discipleship and what it looks like in day-to-day life to follow Jesus. The tools that God's provided. We may even do a class on it.

[41 : 15] But today I'm going to give you the broader picture, the bigger picture. First of all, oh, actually, let me back up. Let me back up.

Because I've got a conversation I had this week that gives a good context for what this means to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Jesus.

A friend of mine asked me this week a great question, which I think was revenge for a great question that I'd asked him a couple months ago. He said to me, John, what can we do to make you successful?

Just as an aside, I felt very blessed by that question. I felt seen, supported. But it got me thinking, because I didn't answer him.

What does success look like? What does that mean? Hebrews 13, 7. 13, 17, excuse me. This is the answer. Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls.

[42 : 32] This is those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you. John wrote in 3 John, nothing gives me greater joy than to see my children walking with the Lord, walking in the truth.

The measure of success, for me personally, is your health. And we work together to follow God and discover what that means.

And unpack God's plan for our lives. To take up our cross. To follow, to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him. We discover it together and we learn together.

And in doing that, it's profitable for you, because you get the life that God has designed. Identify and cultivate your garden. What is your garden?

And own it. God has given it to you. My marriage is not your responsibility. My children are not your responsibility. They're mine.

[43 : 41] My finances, it's my responsibility. No, I need help. The community is part of what God uses to help us cultivate our garden. But identify what is your garden? What is your role in that garden?

What are you doing to see that the people you share that garden with are thriving? And learn. Get into God's Word. Pray.

Talk to the people in this fellowship that have walked the path before you and learn how to cultivate your garden. This next one, I think, is the most important. You need to wrestle with God.

Because the answers aren't easy. They're not obvious. Necessarily. Or, they're really hard. You say, God, I can't do that.

You've got to wrestle with God. You have to get into the trenches with Him and like Jacob, grab a hold of Him and say, I don't understand. I don't know why I'm here. Kara and I have had circumstances like that.

[44 : 46] Wayward children. Financial shortcomings. Chronic health issues. We grab a hold of God and say, I'm not going to let go. I'm not going to let go. Help me to understand.

And you are free to express the emotions that God has given you to Him. Let me rephrase that. You are free to express the emotions that you are feeling to Him.

And allow Him to speak into you. But wrestle with God about these hard things. Why is my life the way it is? Now you have to be ready for the answer. Because it might be your fault. As a matter of fact, I would bet any amount of money that some of it is your fault.

And my fault. But so you take ownership. But we wrestle with God to come to an understanding of what His expectations are. And what specifically in my garden does it mean to deny myself and take up the cross.

To follow God's path. To create an environment that thrives. And recognize that it's a long haul. We don't solve these problems in a day.

[45 : 56] And it's a process of walking with God and listening to Him as He instructs us in the way that we should go. We're going to wrap up with Ephesians chapter 3. Turn there for me.

Ephesians chapter 3. We're going to look at Paul's prayer. Listen as you turn.

Because I'm going to go ahead and read it. For this reason I bow my knees before the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. That He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through the Spirit in the inner man.

So that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. Through faith. Don't miss that. That's what I've been talking about. We're talking about, about we want the King, but we're not ready.

God is doing a work in you to make you ready to submit to the King. He's teaching you how to do that. Paul was praying that the Ephesians would experience that transformation as they're going, as they walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

[46 : 58] That God would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length, height and depth.

And to know the love of Christ, which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up with all the fullness of God. That's God's plan for your life. You learn it by struggling through the valley of the shadow of death.

Walking with Jesus, saying no to your solutions, and saying yes to God's, and wrestling to figure out what those are.

And as you go, God will unpack what that looks like. Some days, it's going to feel like you're never going to get to that summit.

Other days, you'll look back and go, oh, I've actually made some progress. But we have to dedicate ourselves to following the Lord. That's the call.

[48 : 06] Let's pray together. Father, life is hard.

And just when we think it's as hard as it can get, it gets worse. But Lord, it also is a context in which we discover your love for us, your goodness, your mercy.

And Lord, help us to remember that we are never, ever, ever alone. Your promise when you left was, I am with you always to the end of the age. Help us rest in that, find hope in it, even when times are hard.

God, I pray that your spirit would take what we've learned this morning and apply it in each person's life. To give hope, to help us to resolve to follow you.

Because there's no other, there's no better place to be than following you. I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[49 : 08] Amen.