

Farming today: ploughing

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[0 : 00] I'll start this morning with three questions. Why and how do people become Christians? Why and how do people stay and grow as Christians?

Questions of a very personal nature. Some people here today may be uncertain whether they are Christians or perhaps even sure that they're not.

Or we've come here after a week when we've known that we have failed in our lives as Christians. So what does that say about us?

Many of us are deeply troubled when we hear of someone who seems to have stopped living a clear professing Christian life.

Or we're frustrated by the feeling that we've really not gone on in the Christian life ourselves. Will we carry on? And if you're a Christian and live in this city, you will be well aware that you are a member of a very small community.

[1 : 23] You don't need the 2011 census to tell you that you're marginalised and the Christian message is increasingly irrelevant and embarrassingly inappropriate and unintelligible to the majority of the 250,000 people who live here.

And that's also an issue for us as a church. We've invested in a gospel worker and an associate worker at this time and in this city.

Are we deluding ourselves? Are we wasting our money? The statistics or the trends of the statistics are against us.

So these are important questions. And the answers that we get and live with need to be true answers, substantial, tried and tested.

The sort of answers that will stand any test. Now our position in this church is very clear. We find God's truth in God's answers in God's word, the Bible.

[2 : 33] This is easily said, but not so easily followed. Many churches are a mix of Bible teaching and tradition, sometimes by drift and sometimes by choice.

We're hearing a lot about the Roman Catholic Church in these days. The Roman Catholic Church by choice is proud to say that God's truth and answers comes by tradition as well as the Bible. That changes everything. It certainly changes the answers to the questions we've just raised. Then again, we're not immune to culture.

We live in this culture and take it for granted. It affects the way we think and the way we behave. Sometimes by drift and sometimes by choice.

Is the truth and the answers of 500 years ago, let alone 2,000 years ago, any good for today? But we come again to the Bible.

[3 : 42] And the more that we deal with these scriptures, the more their God-breathed beginnings and God-sustained continuance help and direct us. The Bible gives us clear answers to these questions.

One part of the Bible helps us to understand another. And as we look at the whole of the Bible, we find that the revealed truth is a beautiful whole.

It also gives us sufficient answers. Sufficient for us to live by. Sufficient for our thinking and praying and planning. Not complete answers, but sufficient answers.

And there is a difference. So let me remind you of those questions. Why and how do people become Christians? Why and how do people stay and grow as Christians?

And why and how are people in Brighton to become, stay and grow as Christians? And in response to all of this, the Bible says many things. But one of the things it says is, think about farming.

[4 : 52] Farming is one of the most used and the most helpful illustrations that are actually given in the Bible. And which God encourages us to consider. What do you know about farming?

More specifically, what do you know about crop farming? When I was a much younger person, I used to go out and preach in Barkham.

Which is a lovely spot, just to the northwest of Lewis. And the church I went to preach at was full of farmers. And one day, one of the elders in the church, they took me around the farm and showed me the farm.

And it was very interesting, but I couldn't grasp it. I couldn't get hold of it. All these different crops and how it happens. And rotation and preparing the fields and so forth. But this person knew about farming.

There's a field and it looks barren. And a few months later, it's full of crop. How does this happen? The Bible encourages us to find out and think about it. In 2 Timothy 2 verse 6.

[6:02] Go back on there. 2 Timothy 2 verse 6 and 7. The Apostle Paul wants Timothy to think of himself as a hard-working farmer. Let me just turn that up.

You can look at it as well. It's on page 1195 in the Bible. Paul says to Timothy, I want you to think of yourself as an athlete.

I want you to think of yourself as a soldier. But I want you to think of yourself as a farmer. The hard-working farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops. Reflect on what I'm saying. For the Lord will give you insight into all this. What does a hard-working farmer think about? What does he do? How does he go about his hard-working life?

Well, we might learn a bit if we switched on Radio 4 at 5.45 every morning. Because every morning there's a short program called Farming Today. It's presented by a lady called Charlotte Smith.

[7:07] And on the odd occasion when I've caught this program, usually by mistake, I've wondered if Charlotte gets up very early every morning to speak to a number of hard-working farmers. Probably not.

But it's a nice idea. And it seems right that the program is aired at 5.45. Because one thing I know about farmers is that they do get up very early in the morning. Has anybody ever heard of Farming Today?

Oh. It's actually a very interesting program. It's quite accessible, isn't it? And you do learn a lot about farming if you listen to it every day.

Quite seriously, we might be helped to think about our subject today if we tuned into that program. Farming is one of the professions which is very close to the natural world. And the kind of world which Jesus Christ was very close to when he lived on earth.

Now there are two Bible passages I want to point you to today. And this is all about trying to answer those first three questions we posed earlier. The first is in John chapter 3, and especially verses 7 and 8.

[8:16] So please turn that up. Jesus is speaking to a respected Jewish religious leader called Nicodemus.

And he explains what needs to happen if someone is to come to the kingdom and under the rule of Jesus Christ. This is what Jesus says in verses 7 and 8.

Nicodemus, you should not be surprised at my saying, you must be born again. The wind blows wherever it pleases.

You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.

There are three great truths in these verses that directly address the question of how anybody becomes a Christian. Firstly, they need an experience that can only be described as being born again.

[9:38] Such new life needs to be poured into them that totally displaces the old life. They're made completely new. Secondly, this is the work of God's Spirit.

He makes us new. Thirdly, how, why and when this happens is a mystery. It cannot be controlled. It cannot be predicted. It cannot be prevented. This is surely the reason that Jesus used the imagery of wind. So what does this have to do with farming?

Just this, that farmers are acutely conscious of their dependence on the weather. The wind, the rain, the sun. Another farming program that I've seen called First Time Farmers, rather nicely expressed this the other day, as they showed a young farmer sitting in the cab of a very expensive combine harvester, itching to get its harvest in, but it began to rain.

Everything stopped. Farmers have to be patient. Farmers have to be humble. Farmers have to respect the forces of nature.

[10:59] Christians have to be patient. Christians have to be humble. Christians have to totally respect the sovereign work of God.

Jane Campbell, in the 19th century, translated from the German, this well-known harvest song. We plough the fields and scatter, the good seed on the land, but it is fed and watered by God's almighty hand. He sends the snow in winter, the warmth to swell the grain, the breezes and the sunshine, and soft, refreshing rain.

Exactly right. In 1 Corinthians 3, verse 6, Paul, writing to the Corinthians, wants to make it very plain to them, I planted a seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow.

Here is the truth and a fundamental answer to the question, why and how does someone become a Christian? It's a work of God. It can't be controlled.

[12:16] And it can't be predicted. And this humbles us. We can't make this happen by numbers, by money, by techniques, and programs.

All of these can create effects and experiences, but they can't produce the new birth. They can't make a single person a Christian.

But it also encourages us. This is the work of God, who, as Jesus went on to point out to Nicodemus, so loved the world, that he sent his son into the world, not to condemn it, but to save it. Not so that men and women could stay imprisoned in their old dead-end life, but be brought into new life. This has always been God's grand design, all beautifully revealed and made absolutely clear by Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

It encourages us to think that this is God's work, because that means that even the most unlikely people can and do become Christians.

[13:36] Paul was pretty unlikely. The most under-equipped and disadvantaged can and do become Christians. Next-door neighbours and friends, but also members of our families and the people of this neighbourhood and of this city.

This is exactly the sort of thing that God does, because he is minded to do it and it pleases him to do it. And fundamentally, this encourages us to pray that God would do this, that he would send his spirit to change a person out of spiritual darkness into new life in Christ.

that for all the very good evidences he has given of how much he loves people, in spite of every reason why he shouldn't, that he would make real in someone's life what Jesus did by dying on the cross in our place, so that we would not be in darkness and under judgment, but forgiven and a member of God's family.

And I pause and just say to you today, every one of us who is a Christian has people that we know and care for who are not Christians. We're concerned about them, we're troubled at their situation, perhaps we have seen it go on for years and years and years and we may have even lost some hope that anything could be different.

But what I've just said to you is a cause for fresh encouragement to believe that God can and does save people because it's his pleasure to do so.

[15:09] He loves to do this and he will be asked of us to do so. Now our second passage is in Mark chapter 4. So please turn that up again because we're going to carry on the reading from where we stopped.

Mark chapter 4. Mark chapter 4. Verses 14 onwards. It's quite clear that the disciples were quite puzzled by this particular parable.

And I'm glad they were because that encouraged the Lord Jesus to actually give an explanation of the parable which is available for us as well. This is the key parable of the Bible.

It's given in Matthew, Mark and Luke and in every case there is an explanation given by Jesus about what the parable means. And he says if you don't understand this parable you won't understand the others.

It's a key parable. It's very important for us to keep on coming back to it and in fact we do come back to it. It wasn't so long ago that we looked at this particular passage. But it is fundamental for us and it's fundamental for us in understanding and being able to give answers to these three questions we posed earlier.

[16:22] So here we go from verse 14. The farmer sows the word. Luke's account says the farmer sows the word of God.

Verse 15. Some people are like seed along the path where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them.

This is a path or hard ground. The seed God's word can't penetrate the ground it's easily picked off.

Verse 16. Others like seed sown on rocky places hear the word and at once receive it with joy.

But since they have no root they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word they quickly fall away. Picture here is of a thin layer of soil over some rock.

That's the rocky places. The seed goes in to the soil but the roots can't penetrate to any depth at all. So Jesus says these people often respond very gladly to the message of Jesus Christ.

[17:36] But there's no root in their lives. And because there's no root the first sign of difficulty setback anything negative about being a Christian they fall away.

Verses 18 and 19. Still others like seed sown among thorns hear the word but the worries of this life the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word making it unfruitful.

the growth is choked by other things in life. Verse 20. Others like a seed sown on good soil hear the word accept it and produce a crop 30, 60 or even 100 times what was sown.

That's a good crop real fruitfulness. The starting point is the sower and the seed. Essentially people become Christians by God's word being brought into their lives.

This is the work of sowing and we'll look at that on another occasion. Today we're paying attention to the ground. Not all people become Christians when the truth of the Bible and especially the gospel message is brought to them.

[19:01] Jesus is very clear that this is not the fault of the sower and it is not the fault of the seed but it's down to the condition of the ground. So alongside the mystery of the new birth which we saw from John there's a process taking place.

The mystery is inexplicable and uncontrollable. The process is something that can be seen considered and understood.

We can see it in ourselves. We can see it in other people. Hearts becoming spiritually soft or spiritually hard to God's word.

And when I use the word soft and hard I'm not talking about people who are hard hearted in the worldly sense. People who are sort of unemotional or not disturbed by things that happen in life.

I'm not talking about people who are unmoved by great classical music or works of art and so forth. I'm talking about a spiritual hardness. You can have people who are most sensitive and emotionally mature in many ways but who are absolutely spiritually hard.

[20:21] Jesus says that we all have a particular responsibility when it comes to the way we hear the word of God.

Watch out he says he who has ears let him hear. This matters and how you hear it matters.

In the next parable in Luke Jesus says in verse 18 consider carefully how you listen. Consider carefully how you listen.

So there are three failures and one success. But and there's an important point the ground is essentially the same stuff the same material.

There is no so called God gene that makes one person more likely to become a Christian than another. There was a lot of talk about that about the turn of the millennium.

[21:26] They're the so-called God gene. There are some people out of this congregation who are more likely to become Christians because of something about their genetic makeup. Some inherited evolutionary process that makes some people more likely to become religious than others.

I think the Bible makes it very plain whatever science may say about this subject. The Bible makes it very plain that that is absolutely wrong. There's no so-called God gene that makes anybody more likely to become a Christian than someone else.

No particular experience or lack of experience no particular education or lack of education no particular personality or age or life circumstance that makes somebody more vulnerable to being a Christian and others being more vulnerable to being hard in their hearts and unreceptive.

The ground is the same. It's the same stuff. It's what happens to the ground. And here's another point, a point we learned from farming. The ground starts hard.

Unyielding, overgrown, thorny, and unpromising. This is a story of mankind. David mournfully says in Psalm 51, surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

[23 : 07] Which is always very discouraging for new parents. But it remains a truth. And a truth that's never been denied by human experience.

That our children come into the world not just into a world of sin, but with sin inside their world. The ground is hard.

Our gorgeous, cute little infants are hard ground. and they need the work of God's Holy Spirit exactly the same as adults.

It needs work to break up the hard ground. Work to cut away the thorns. It needs ploughing. time. I want to say one more thing about this passage.

And that is, it's never too late. I find nothing in this passage that suggests that one sort of ground shouldn't turn into another.

[24 : 17] That hard ground can't turn into good ground. It's never too late. We're not fatalists in this. I'm not saying this morning, if you've gone down a road in your life and your life is just hard against the things of Jesus Christ then that's it.

We don't believe that. God delights to break up hard ground and to make it suitable for his work. work. This is the work of God.

Nice picture of a field today and a pathway through the middle of it, public footpath going through the middle, sowing his seed to left and to right.

I was out walking yesterday and I thought, well this looks particularly unpromising soil. Indeed it is by the seashore. there, a bit of grass overlying some rocks and then loads and loads of tangled weeds and thorns and it needs ploughing.

Ploughing is a wonderful thing, it's been around for centuries. Ever since the dawn of farming, people understood that you can't just put seed on a bit of hard ground, you need to make a groove in the ground.

[25 : 37] So making the process of ploughing in those days like that, now like this, or better, amazing machines, but it's all the same in the end, it's the same process, it's breaking up the hard ground, breaking up the ground so that it becomes pieces of soil, breaking up the root structures underneath the ground, making a groove within which the seed can be protected and nourished and grow.

This is exactly what the Lord Jesus was talking about. What he had in his mind. We pray for ground out there which is like a ploughed field, which is ready to receive the word of God.

We need to have our lives like a ploughed field ready to receive the word of God. There's a ploughing work to be done, there's a breaking up of the hard ground to be undertaken.

I want to suggest therefore that there's something for us to pray about, that God would actually prepare people's hearts to receive his word.

True it is that God and his sovereignty can break into the hardest heart today, now. true it is also that normally speaking there's a process takes place.

[27 : 07] And we need to pray for that process to be happening in this community and in this city, that the hard ground should be broken up.

need to pray that the circumstances of people's lives would actually speak to them about the truth of God. So I was thinking about this this morning, I was reminded of a very wonderful story, a very surprising story, which I'm going to ask Katie to come up and tell you about, because she's closer to this one.

It had to do with a friend of ours, her name is Barbara, and she turned away from the Lord, became quite rejecting, even cynical, and hard in her heart against the things of God.

And then she had a very serious illness. Katie, come and tell us. Yes, it was ever so upsetting for us, because we'd known Barbara before we'd even got married, and our children grew up together, and she lived locally to us, and we were very good friends and very good Christian friends.

And then it almost happened suddenly, but it probably wouldn't in her own heart. She said, I'm sorry, I'm not a Christian anymore.

[28 : 40] I can't understand why God allows this, and this, and I just feel far away from him. And it was just ever so, ever so upsetting for us.

And then, as Chris said, she got a very serious illness, and she was in hospital in Brighton, and a Christian nurse started to care for her.

and I don't know what she said to her, but she certainly said that she'd pray for her. And quite wonderfully, the Lord used this very serious illness to speak to her again that he was there, and he

cared for her.

And Barbara wonderfully came back to the Lord, and it wasn't too long after that that she died, but she died as a Christian. And it was just really, really wonderful for us, wasn't it, that she did.

Sometimes things happen to people, and you think this is going to be such bad news. It's going to make them so hard in their hearts, the thing they're going through. They're going to be so discouraged and disappointed.

[29 : 57] And the wonderful thing about the situation in Barbara's life is that she who had been so complaining and so troubled by all the bad things that were happening in the world and saying, how could a God of love allow this?

Had a diagnosis of cancer in herself as a youngish person. And exactly all the things that she'd been saying that would have caused her to say again, well that just proves my point.

There can't be a God of love if this happens to me as a wife and a mother with teenage children and so forth. How can there be a God of love out there? But God used this to break up the hard ground of her heart and to speak to her.

God could use anything and it's so much to his glory and praise, isn't it? What a great God we have. There's something to pray for. There's something to be done.

We need to put ourselves in a place where God's word may speak to us. Book of Hosea, we read this.

[31 : 11] People of God are in a very bad state at this point. And Hosea cries out to them, break up your unplowed ground for it's time to seek the Lord.

It's a message for people who are professing belief. saying, break up your unplowed ground, it's time to seek the Lord. It's a message for us today, isn't it?

There's unplowed ground in all of our lives. There's ground that we've allowed to become tangled. There's ground that is seriously hard.

There's ground which is really untouched by the word of God. we keep it in an area of our lives and we don't allow the truth of God's word to touch it.

And this is a challenge to us today. It's a call to us from thousands of years ago to break up your unplowed ground for it is time to seek the Lord.

[32 : 17] there are habits in our lives that must be broken and there will be by God's grace.

There are ways of thinking that need to be changed and there will be by God's grace. We need to be fellowshiping with each other and encouraging each other and we will by God's grace.

We need to be choosing God's ways and not what is offered to us by the world and we will by God's grace but this is all part of the command to break up your unplowed ground.

Who is to do this work? Can I do it for you? I can't. You've got to do it. you've got to plough your ground.

It's your responsibility to do so. By God's grace you will do it. And God's word will again be fertile in these barren areas of your life.

[33 : 37] life. We need to like Barbara allow the circumstances of our lives to speak God's truth to us rather than allow the circumstances of our lives to generate unbelief.

to say about every part of the situation of your life I wish this wasn't the way it was.

But I'm going to find out God's purpose in it. I'm not going to think about my life as everyone else out there thinks about their lives.

I'm going to think about it through the lens. Through the filter of God's truth. I'm going to say God is on his throne.

And he is in full control of the detail of my life. And I will believe that. And I will look carefully at all those issues of my life that I do find hard and troubling and upsetting.

[34 : 57] And I will say God is on his throne. And I want to learn what he wants to say to me and how he wants to change me in those situations of my life.

Break up your unplowed ground for it's time to seek the Lord. It's time for you to have a different attitude about something that you've been going through for a while. You need to break up your unplowed ground.

ground. Your ground has just been ridden over by the thinking of the world, by the thinking of the gossip magazines, by something that you've seen on television.

You need to have the word of God's truth blazing into that. There's something to be decided to respond to what God has already said to us.

Some of us need to come to God and ask for his forgiveness and welcome because of what Jesus did upon the cross. Some of us have stayed too far at a distance away from the cross of Jesus Christ and we need to come much closer to it.

[36 : 21] some of us need to come back to God because we've been living at a distance from him and given up on the life of repentance and trust. We're not repenting for our sin, we're not trusting in God, we're just carrying on in the slipstream of Christianity without the genuine realities of sorrow for sin and conscious, tangible trust in God.

all of us need to pray that our hearts which are trending towards hardness would be kept soft, open and receptive to his word, that the life of Christ might flow more freely and fully in and through us. For all of us and for all around us, there is hope. I want to close with a story that I read yesterday from Evangelicals Now.

As a pastor sometimes there are meetings with people which you dread. Not long ago I was contemplating such a meeting. Years previously a couple had left the church as their marriage was on the brink of breaking up.

We'd never really known where Jason stood spiritually. His wife Naomi was a good solid Christian who had stuck with Jason through sporadic infidelities but had understandably come to the end of her tether with a new affair.

[37 : 55] There were some pretty tense, not to say bruising, counselling sessions. We elders who don't always manage to get everything right had done our best to remonstrate with Jason but to no avail.

We saw no option but for church discipline. For him and in the aftermath, the family left us. But that was not the end of the story.

Just as we were about to go away for some holiday, Jason phoned. Could he come and talk to us? Oh no, we thought. We had not had contact with him for years.

Were we going to be reproached for some kind of pastoral failure from the past? What was this all about? We arranged for him to come and see us after our time away. In the interim, the whole thing played on our minds.

Eventually, the night of the meeting came. We prayed much but my stomach churned as the doorbell rang. There was Jason but there was no frown. He seemed relaxed and calm. He came in and sat down and over a pot of tea, his story came tumbling out to the glory of God.

[39 : 00] His marriage had broken up and his wife had moved to another town. In a backslidden state, Jason had drifted right away from the Lord and from the church. There had been a divorce.

But he and Naomi had stayed in touch. After all the years and the ups and downs of their marriage, somehow, they were still friends and would seek to help and look out for each other when they could.

Then Naomi's mother, a wonderful old Christian lady, was ill and it became clear that it would not be too long before she died. Jason felt it would be right to visit his ex-mother-in-law.

This visit turned out to be quietly momentous. He entered the room where she was. She smiled and her obvious peace in the face of death through her trust in the Lord Jesus Christ was simply overwhelming.

Jason did not tell us what was said, but the palpable sense of this Christian lady's joy in God as she lay on her deathbed impacted him deeply.

[40 : 05] He could not get it out of his mind. As I left, I knew that this was real. And all these years I had simply been running away from God.

So it was that later he was led to get down on his knees and with all his heart repent and turn back to Christ. And he had certainly changed. It was not the old Jason we had before us in our sitting room, but a new man.

peace of Christ, which he had encountered at his mother-in-law's deathbed, was now clearly in him too. He was now committed to fellowship at another church, and he just felt it was right to come and see us and apologize for all the difficulty he had caused us in the past.

Sometimes the Lord surprises us in glorious ways. What I had imagined would be a most difficult evening, turned out to be one of the most joyous and spiritually uplifting times we could imagine.

Dare to dream, dare to pray, dare to plough up your own life so that you can receive God's word. Amen.