

# Keep On Growing: Storing Up Treasures - 21st May 2023

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[ 0 : 00 ] So, I just want to give you a little quick update. Thank you for your messages and your prayers about my dad. Just a little update on him as he's been in hospital in Hull, near where they live.

And just a slight recap, a couple of weeks ago he had emergency surgery on his spine to remove a blood clot, which had caused some paralysis from the waist down.

He's then had an infection in his spine, which was causing him to have seizures. So, last weekend he was put into an induced coma and then on a ventilator.

And that's why I had to buzz off last Sunday, mid-service, because I got a call to say it wasn't looking good for him and needed to get up there pretty swiftly. Good news is, though, he's rallied by the end of this week, by yesterday in particular.

So, he's now been taken off sedation. The infection's hopefully slowly getting better. And he's regaining consciousness after sedation and this induced coma. And he's got some movement as well, which is all positive.

[ 1 : 01 ] So, very grateful for all the care that he's received. Very grateful for your prayers and your support on that. I'm slightly conflicted by it because we don't quite know what he's got in terms of movement and control and so on.

It's almost like the hard work starts now in terms of working out what that will mean for him and my mum. As you can imagine, I'm sure others have gone through this. When you're called in and you think your family's going to go, the grieving process starts if it hasn't done already.

And then it's good he's come back. But then that's a difficult thing to then put a lid on as well. So, it's been a complicated week for my mum in particular. So, I'd be grateful for your prayers ongoing for her and my dad and especially my sister as well.

Thank you once again. And it's been a complicated week for a number of us, I know. A number of folks had a tough time of late. I mean, Marie is our parish administrator. Her brother, John, he needed complicated surgery this week himself.

And whilst the op's gone okay, he's left with some life-changing consequence of that. And then Nigel, beloved church caretaker, he was doing some gardening out the back here, tripped up and has sadly fractured the bottom edge of his tibia, which is a real shame for him.

[ 2 : 15 ] So, he's in plaster, had surgery yesterday to put that back together. So, he's off his feet for a while. That's a real blow for him and Karen. But do remember him in your prayers. He's an active kind of guy, so to be plastered up is not going to be easy for him.

Prayers for Marie and her brother and family as well too. Barbara Ann has had surgery, which again went well, but then there was further complications with her intestines, which required emergency surgery on Thursday night.

There's others who are dealing with things. I know Jason's dad continues to be poorly. Kev was saying about Juliet's granddad. He's taken a turn over the weekend, which isn't looking good.

There's others dealing with grief.

I know for Steve and Ann and Ethan and Wes and the family, grieving the loss of Steve's mum. Pete and Lucy, grieving their parents too. And you'll know as well as me.

I mean, there's a lot to name in some ways. There'll be others, others here, other situations we know. Whether it's physical health, mental health, grief. There's exam stress building at the moment.

[ 3 : 17 ] I know relational strains, financial worries. There's some we know about. Some are a bit more understandably private, but which folks are dealing with too. And in all that, it's a reminder.

In a way, we don't need reminding, but it's worth saying. Life can be tough sometimes, and it's complicated as well. But I guess in that toughness, that difficulty, when acknowledging that, it kind of frees us from having to try and find the right words to say.

We just say, this is tough. This is hard. You don't need to say much more than that often. We certainly don't have to work out reasons for things, because often there are no reasons. Sometimes life is what it is.

Instead, I've appreciated this. I think perhaps the best response is to offer support and solidarity with those who are going through it. Practical help.

Encouragement. Beers or flowers on the doorstep are always welcome. So thank you for those that have come our way this week. Prayer to. I say that last, but that underpins everything.

[ 4 : 23 ] I know, asking for God's spirit to be the comforter, the strengthener, and the healer for people, either directly or often through the care that we and others can offer to those in need.

So in that context, let's just pray and commit ourselves and our loved ones, our community, to God. So God, we do ask for your hands to be on all those people, all those situations that are on our hearts.

Lord, those we've mentioned, those unsaid, but in our minds, people who are still equally precious to you. God, through your spirit, through us, through professional carers, we ask that your presence would be at work in our lives and the lives of our loved ones.

Bring in wholeness and healing wherever possible, but also release and peace where that is needed too. Lord, in your own way, would you sustain those who are suffering, sustain those who are caring with your strength and your faithfulness.

Lord, thank you that you know us so well. You know us better than we know ourselves. You know all of our thoughts, you know our needs, our joys, our concerns.

[ 5 : 40 ] And you know that your love for us is unailing. So may we be reassured today by that fact.

In turn, God, would you keep us therefore humble and empathetic, ever mindful that there is nearly always more going on for each of us than we could possibly be aware of.

And yet you do know. So would you give us, please, the insight we need when it's appropriate. Would you give us your sensitivity? That we would always treat one another with grace and patience and kindness.

At the same time, Lord, in the midst of the tougher stuff, we ask you, please, to open our eyes and ears to what is good in life. I heard a phrase this week that says, the moon is always full, it's just sometimes it's in shadow.

So help us to know the fullness of this life, even if it's not always visible to us. Help us to be grateful for healing when it comes.

[ 6 : 54 ] To be thankful for the people in our lives who bring us joy. To be appreciative of this church and the gift of community we receive through it from you. And above all, may we be grateful for Jesus.

May we fix our eyes on him. The one through whom you reveal your character, your ways, your love. Lord, thank you that in focusing on Jesus, you help us make sense of life in this world and the next.

So help us to follow Jesus and to put our trust in him. And Lord, it's in the loving, eternal, brilliant name of Jesus.

We pray these things. Amen. Amen. In many ways, thinking through some of the stuff that's going on in people's lives and praying that we might know God at work through it.

Well, it ties in really with what I'd just like to share a little bit about this morning as we turn to this series that we've been doing in recent weeks called Keep On Growing. And I say it kind of ties in because I guess a question which arises from this series might be, okay, how do we keep on growing when life throws us these curveballs, these unexpected turns, these tougher times?

[ 8 : 21 ] You know, life is not linear. It's not predictable. So how might we keep on growing through all of the ups and downs and the twists and turns that we might face in life?

Well, there are probably many answers to this, probably a lifetime of answers. But the idea I'd like to unpack a bit today, if we can, is about ensuring that we've got the right resources and stores to draw on when life does get tough and we feel like we might be somewhat running on empty.

Indeed, to kick off our thinking, I just want to read a few words from Jesus that he shares in Matthew's Gospel, chapter 6. He says this, he says, You might have heard those words before. It's part of a passage in Matthew's Gospel known as a Sermon on the Mount, a series of pithy little teachings that Jesus gives about living life God's way in the best way possible. And so he begins this little bit, as we've just seen. Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth where moths and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal. [ 9 : 53 ] And it's interesting in these verses, I think, but also elsewhere. I think it's fair to say Jesus is very clearly anti-hoarding. He's an anti-hoarder.

For example, he tells a parable in Luke 12 about a rich man who simply carries on keeping more and more of his crops for himself, building up ridiculous amounts in order to live a lazy and indulgent life.

Don't do that, says Jesus. Don't do that. We're not to keep for ourselves more than we need. Yeah, by all means, plan ahead and be sensible.

Keep a bit in reserve if we can so that we're not perhaps an unnecessary or unexpected burden on others. But don't hoard. Don't store up treasures on earth, says Jesus.

Jesus. Indeed, hoarding wealth, hoarding treasures. Not only, I guess, is that just greedy when our excess could be helping others who are in need, but it also risks us becoming paranoid, I think, that our prized possessions are going to get destroyed or nicked.

[ 11 : 03 ] I often wonder, a bit like, you know when you drive past those big gated houses with the massive drives and the gates and stuff that you can't see through? I often wonder. It might be a dream home in some ways.

You know, a Kirstie and Phil would have a field day or whatever. But the security needed on those gated places not only keeps people out, there's a sense in which I wonder if it also traps people inside.

You know, they become wary of visitors, distanced from neighbours, set apart from their community. Don't hoard. Don't store up treasures.

It's just stuff, says Jesus. In fact, often, or on other occasions, he says, just get rid of it, you know, downsize. Give it away. Because you'll probably be far less stressed by not having to worry about losing it and then have far more time by not having to maintain it.

There's a simplicity to this often. Instead, says Jesus, flipping it round, store up for yourselves treasures in heaven where moths and rust do not destroy and where thieves do not break in and steal.

[ 12 : 10 ] Now, what does he mean by store up treasures in heaven? Well, I guess on first glance, we might assume Jesus is talking about life after death, living this life in such a way that we get into heaven, you know, we cash our spiritual chips in when we die kind of stuff.

And yet, as we learn elsewhere in the Bible, getting into heaven, if that's what we want to describe it as, that's a gift from God.

It's an invitation based not on anything we've done, but purely on what God has done for us through Jesus. It's grace. It's undeserved favour that enables us to be with God forever, not something we can earn or achieve or pay into, if you like.

Instead, when Jesus talks about heaven, it's actually usually in the context of recognising God's eternal presence in the here and now, you know, of experiencing the joys of heaven here on earth. That's why Jesus comes to be with us, something of heaven coming to earth. That's why God's spirit is among us now, again, something of heaven here on earth.

[ 13 : 19 ] That's why Jesus teaches us to pray, your kingdom come, your will be done, here on earth as it is in heaven. Now, the idea, I guess, of knowing God's presence in our lives, that's not an unusual one.

You know, we talk about that here each week. We ask to know God's presence in our lives every week. But I think what is interesting is the way Jesus talks about storing up that presence, that spiritual treasure, if you like.

So how can we store up God's presence with us? What might you mean? Well, I guess just as we might go to food cupboard to get tins out when we're hungry, we might get water out the tap when we're thirsty, or money out the bank when we need to buy something.

So the suggestion seems to be that we can stock up our spiritual cupboard or fill our spiritual tank or invest in a spiritual bank, which we can then draw on when we need to.

Indeed, in using the language of storage, Jesus implies that there's a way to store spiritual sustenance that can be used at a later date to keep us growing even when or especially when times are tough.

[14:40] So how might we build up this spiritual store, these spiritual reserves? I just want to consider two ways this morning, and we'll think about some practical examples with each.

I mean, firstly, and I guess most obviously, building up our spiritual store means spending time with God. It's kind of a, yeah, you can't really be a Christian if you don't spend time with God. That's kind of part of the package, really. How we do that will differ for each of us. But it may include reading or listening to or watching dramatized versions of the Bible.

It'll involve talking with God, whether in set ways or with set prayers, more conversationally perhaps instead, when we're cooking or cleaning or taking a shower or walking the dog, however that conversation flows for us.

It may include reading books or magazine articles or blogs about God and life, listening to podcasts, watching YouTube videos, whether that's talks or discussions or meditations.

[15:47] It could be singing or playing or listening to worship songs or other music that connects us with God. It could be doing something artistic, or journaling or taking photos.

It will hopefully include coming to church, kind of a one-stop shop in many ways for learning and prayer and worship and so on. This is a kind of hopefully an intense hour or so each week when we can focus on God.

And it sounds obvious, but I guess intentionally carving out time to spend with God, if we're talking about growth, well that's essential for our growth.

Because it's the strength of that relationship which will keep us going and growing even when life gets tough and we're tempted to throw in the towel perhaps.

I don't know how you feel sometimes. I know for me, I miss God when I haven't had the opportunities to connect with him enough. You know you get that kind of, something doesn't quite feel or sit right.

[16:49] You think, yeah, I haven't spoken to you today much. Sorry, or this week, or this month even, whatever it is. So for me, it's those walks around Chasewater, it's those times in the garden and the sunshine helps, it's those podcasts on long car journeys when my mind and my faith is being fed.

They all replenish my spiritual store so that when I haven't got the time or the inclination to be super spiritual, if you like, I've got stuff I can draw on that I've been paying in, I suppose.

I can say, ah yeah, even though I might not feel it right now and I haven't got the energy or the words, I know you're with me God because of all that I've been aware of in the past.

I know it's going to be all right. It's interesting, the Greek word that we translate in our Bibles that Jesus uses as store in these verses comes from the word thesaurus.

It's the same term we use for that book that contains or is a store of every word possible. So just as we might use a thesaurus when we can't quite find the right words on our own, it's I guess in the same way, spending time with God when things are going well means that we'll store up words of experience or truth, a store we can draw on in those times when we feel we haven't got the words, we haven't got the energy, the capacity to keep going.

[18:23] As I wonder for you, I said Chase Water, The Garden, Podcast, whatever, they work for me, sort of replenish my store. I wonder for you, what habits, what practices put stock in your spiritual store?

How do you keep your spiritual thesaurus, your spiritual store full enough so you can draw on it when you haven't got the words yourself?

How do you replenish your relationship with God? And it might have been some time since you did. What worked for you years ago, perhaps? If you're not sure, then we can try any of those ways I mentioned, try your own ideas.

But then a kind of supplementary question is, if we can identify what works for us when times are good, when we felt, yeah, felt connected with God, if we're honest, how often do we do those things?

I mentioned Chase Water, I haven't been for walk around Chase Water for a couple of months now, and I know that and I need to because that's my special place in a way. Do we do those kind of things often enough?

[ 19 : 35 ] Do we carve out time for those? And if we're struggling to carve out time, knowing how important those times are, what could we maybe put down or stop doing or maybe best of all involve God in the stuff we are doing so that we do spend intentional time with him?

For example, I mean, I remember I used to work for HMV and it was a retail, busy environment in a busy megastore and stuff and the working day was full on and God kind of got shunted to the side for the sort of eight till six or whatever the working day was.

But when I could, when I was stacking shelves, you know, replenishing stuff or whatever, I remember I just used to quietly ask God in that action of stacking shelves to bring order out of whatever was feeling chaotic in my life or the lives of my friends and my family, using the activity to be the prayer, if that makes sense.

Even something as, you know, for me, boring as stacking shelves. I love working for HMV in some ways but I had to try and incorporate God into the day to not park my faith when I was working there.

So how might we invite and involve God in our everyday tasks? Whether that work or with the kids or the commute or while we're walking around Aldi, you know, as you're putting stuff in your trolley, your basket, maybe that could be a prompt for our prayer.

[ 21 : 07 ] Lord, give me your love. Give me your joy. Give me your peace as you pop in your peas and your falafels and your pies or whatever, you know, for each item.

Ask for God's fruit to be in your basket as well. I don't know. However we do it, it's all storing up heavenly treasure that we can draw on to keep on growing even when we do feel particularly empty or we feel poor in spirit as Jesus might say.

That's one way. That's the first way. But secondly, I'd say we build up our spiritual store not just by connecting with God but by connecting with people too.

Investing, we might say, in community. For example, we had a really good time at Pub Club last week at the Red Moor with about 40 of us there and what I loved was that it was a right old mix of people.

I had another mate there who was not part of church he was like, who are all these people then? He's like, well this is all from church you know. And he was like, blimey, it's quite a mishmash isn't it? It's like, yeah, it is.

[ 22 : 13 ] It is. That's not a bad thing. You know, there's probably 50 years of age range between us which was great. Whether it's Pub Club or dropping or creating space or little friends or F&F; or whatever, you know, these social spaces are where we get to know each other best.

And yet, thinking about it, what's also interesting for me is that looking around at something like Pub Club often about half of those who regularly come to that are relatively new to St John's.

You've maybe joined us in the last two or three years. Now it's heartening to see so many newer folks getting stuck into getting to know people but at the same time I do wonder if that might not be a bit of a prod to some of us who are perhaps much longer term members to keep on making the effort to get to know each other, to get to know new folks as well as the ones who we've known for a decade or more.

Whether that's at Pub Club, at Coffee Time on a Sunday, meeting up outside of here for a walk or a snack or whatever. However we do that, I wonder if God might be calling those who are feeling quite comfortable perhaps with their existing friendships to push the boat out a little bit and make the intention with newer folks.

Now how does talking, sharing, being open with one another build up our spiritual store? How is it not just a social thing? Well I think in a whole host of ways. For example, I find hearing new people enthuse about their faith, about church, about their journey in ways we haven't heard before, it encourages and it inspires us in our faith and our feelings.

[ 24 : 07 ] I mean, Claire's over there. I've known Claire since I was here, 12 years now. Some people may not know Claire but when she shared, I know that touched a lot of people because it was an honest sharing of her life, where she's been, where she's at and how God's been with her.

It's good to hear stories of people who we may not know, may not have encountered before. Again, tying in with what Ian was saying last week, since every person is made in the image of God, then we should in theory be able to see something of God in everyone.

Think about that for a minute. When you look in someone else's eyes, Faith, when you look in someone else's eyes, if they're made in the image of God, which they are, you should be able to

see something of God in them.

That's a huge privilege and that's quite mind-blowing, I think. I mean, how cool would it be if every time we spoke to someone for the first time, we were expectant for how we might meet with God or see Jesus in them.

See Jesus in them in a way that we'd never seen Jesus before. That's a privilege. If we want to connect with God, we can do so by looking for him in other people.

[ 25 : 25 ] I'm not saying you want to get all hippie and weird and intense and stuff and go, oh, I see God in you. Do you know what I mean? It's not like do-do-do-do, not like that, but every new person, every new conversation can therefore be a gift, a way to help us meet with God afresh, a way to help us realise that we can keep growing in our faith and our relationships even if we ourselves feel like we haven't got much to offer.

Putting the time in with people, being curious and expectant and open, meeting new people, there are all ways in which that one can keep us growing, also keep us young in our faith in some ways, childlike.

And I say all this is a huge introvert who is drained by meeting people. I love people but I find them tiring. I don't know if you would agree with that.

But the more people we can connect with, the more chance there is, that someone with just the right words or just the right support will be on hand for us when we need those words or that support because we haven't got it in our own resources.

And it's not that we talk with people in the hope of one day benefiting from them, you know, it's not a speculate to accumulate kind of thing. But those benefits are simply a byproduct of genuine community and genuine care.

[ 26 : 49 ] Above all, Ian was on this last week. People are precious. People are precious. And I know for me, if in some sort of sliding doors, parallel universe, you know, if Gemma and I had never moved here with a four month old Heidi in tow at the time, yes, God would hopefully have provided community for us elsewhere and we'd have had a very different life.

But knowing who I know here now, you know, knowing you, I'd be gutted if that had been the case. I'd be gutted if I'd missed out on knowing you.

And what a gift, what an adventure, what a privilege community really is. What a privilege it is to see God in others in ways that sustain and grow our own faith, even when, or especially when, we can't always feel or see God at work in our own lives.

And then finally, I guess, perhaps best of all in this, as well as being able to receive support and strength from God through each other, we also get to serve God through serving each other.

You know, what's more, in God's goodness, it's often through serving others within community that God can lift us out of our own situation and bring us through. It really isn't giving that we receive.

[ 28 : 14 ] Because through serving others, it changes perhaps our perspectives, our empathy can deepen, maybe our introspection can lessen where necessary. Get a note for me, for example, my depression, which is kind of there most of the time, tends to lift when I feel useful, when I feel I've made a difference to someone else's life.

So community helps with depression, being part of something, serving others, even if we don't always feel like being of service. That can keep us growing with God and with each other.

And that'll do for now. Because we're shortly going to share in communion, a way in which we commune with God and with each other. But I think as we share in communion in a few minutes' time, I guess in terms of these two ways of storing up heavenly treasure that we touched on, spending time with God, spending time in community, one of the beauties of communion is that it's a pretty good picture, I think, of what those two things look like combined.

We're kneeling, we're approaching the rail in the presence of God, but we're doing that alongside each other in order to receive from him.

As we go through life, you'll know as well as me, there'll be good times and bad. We'll have valleys and peaks to navigate. And yet in order to keep on growing with God and with each other through our whole life, Jesus says, store up treasures in heaven, treasures which we can draw on when we need, treasures which ultimately come from spending time with God and time with one another.

[ 30 : 01 ] Jesus concludes this bit saying where our treasure is, there our heart is also. So may God continue to give us the treasures of his spirit and his people so that our heart may be with him and with each other.

Amen.