

Getting To Grips With Growth

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[0 : 00] If you would turn back with me please to the passage we read in Isaiah chapter 54. I'd like to look today for a short time at verse 2 especially, looking at some of the detail round about it, but especially the words of verse 2.

Enlarge the place of your tent and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out. Do not hold back, lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes.

Well here's a message that we can carry with us into a new year as that prospect opens up before us as we're coming fast towards the end of this particular year.

Because it's a message of encouragement, it's a message of promise indeed to God's people in Isaiah's time. It's very significant that chapter 53, so much taken up with the sufferings of the Messiah as they came to be fulfilled in Jesus, in his death and his sufferings and death on the cross fulfilled.

And indeed spoken of with such detail these hundreds of years before the event itself. It's something itself that proves for us the divine origin of prophecy in the Bible, in the scriptures.

[1 : 19] But it's significant that that chapter that deals so much with his sufferings, with death, should immediately be followed by a chapter beginning with the word sing.

Sing. Sing as part of the outcome or the benefits that accrue from the kind of death that's mentioned in chapter 53. It leads to the rejoicing church.

It leads to the growth of the church. It leads to God's people coming to sing and cry aloud in rejoicing and praise to God. But the setting is one of darkness, of gloom, because the picture you have there is the church as represented by these images of a woman that's been deserted.

In verse 6, the Lord called you as a wife, deserted and grieved in spirit, like a wife of youth when she is cast off. It's like somebody just newly married and then deserted or abandoned so that she's not come to bear children.

And there's a picture of her there sitting in grief and some in that lonely, deserted, childless situation. That's the image that Isaiah or God is giving to Isaiah of the church of his time.

[2 : 37] Because as you know, the prophets were sent to the people of Israel, Judah, at a time of massive decline spiritually in the nation. They had deserted the ways of the Lord.

They had gone after the gods of the Canaanites. They had imported so much of that religion into their own practices. And so God was sending them these messages from Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, these prophets.

And prophesying of a disaster to come if they did not actually heed God's voice and repent and turn to his ways. Which is what happened, of course, when they came in the days of Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king, to be taken into captivity.

And Jerusalem and the temple were wrecked by the Babylonians. But Isaiah draws the mind of, and especially those people who were faithful to God in those times, who needed encouragement, who were concerned for God's honor and God's glory, and for the growth of God's people in their influence in their own lives as well.

So Isaiah and the message of Isaiah was directed to them particularly where the encouragements of this great book of Isaiah are directed as encouragements to them.

[3 : 58] Because what he's saying here is that this future, this immediate future, is not the end. There will come a time of greater darkness, of captivity to the Babylonians.

But then there's something else beyond that. And so he's taking us into the days of the New Testament, the days of blessing, the days of the fruit, really, of chapter 53, coming to an incorporation of the Gentiles, you and I, who were not born of Israel, and all others who've come to belong to the church, who were not brought up as Jews.

They've come to be incorporated into the church, as we see from the book of Acts onwards in the New Testament age. And here's something that encourages those people who were faithful in Isaiah's day to look forward in hope.

And to look forward in hope and in anticipation of a great increase of an enlargement of God's church, even though in the immediate there is a decline and there is much to be gloomy about. So here's something that you and I can bring with us into the New Year as it looms large before us. Indeed, you can take it as something that applies to every day in our experience as we would want to capture something of the Spirit and of this vision.

[5 : 19] So what it's saying is, prepare for growth. Get a mindset that really looks forward, not to further decline, but to an increase.

Get ready for the increase. And that's really a challenge to us today. Are we really, I know we're praying for increase, we're praying for enlargement, we're praying for God's cause to increase and to expand, not only with ourselves as a congregation, but of course with that as well.

But are we really taking the steps towards that? Are we gearing up our minds for growth? Are we, as we've entitled this study, are we getting to grips with growth? Are we really seeing in our own experience where that fits into our daily lives and in the life of the congregation here as we belong to it?

So the two things we're going to look at are, first of all, how he is encouraging them to lengthen their cords. And secondly, to strengthen the stakes.

Lengthening the cords and strengthening the stakes. And if you take the first of these, you can see that that really applies to people living in tented accommodation, where you find that the cords that hold down the tents obviously have to be firmly fixed for the security of the tent and those who are living in it.

[6 : 45] And what he's saying now is enlarge the place of your tent. Get ready to stretch out the curtains of your habitation. You're going to need, he says, a greater increase in area to accommodate those who are going to come in and join you as a people.

Now that's the mindset that you and I must seek to have, though we don't know for sure what God's promise, what God's providence holds for us in the immediate future.

But as we'll see from our study today, I hope this is the kind of mindset, the kind of approach, this is the kind of thinking, of attitude that really has to be applied by us as we're seeking the advance of God's cause, the advance of the gospel, the influence of the gospel, and our own contribution within that gospel movement towards growth.

So here he's saying, as you're living in tents, he's thinking of a natural habitation or dwelling place with tents. What he's saying is, your family is going to grow.

And because your family is going to grow, you have to enlarge the place of your tent. You have to make preparations for that growth. So lengthen your cords. The cords that hold the tent down, they've got to be lengthened.

[8 : 05] It's got to be made bigger. Room for more to actually come and live within the tent. First of all, let's see that that's a correct biblical attitude.

Let's deal with things fairly practically today. It's a biblical attitude. It's mandated by scripture itself that we should look for growth, that we should pray for growth and act towards spiritual growth in our own situation and beyond.

Because growth is actually a necessary part of our experience as a church. It's something that really should be built into our thinking, that all the time we should be thinking along the lines of growth.

And as we'll see in the second part, strengthening the cords, strengthening the stakes rather, growth is something that is growth downwards as well as outwards. Because when we think about church growth, we're thinking about our growth spiritually, our growth in knowledge, our growth in those sorts of areas of our experience.

But that doesn't mean we're not to include as an important element of growth, numerical growth. That too is to be part of our thinking.

[9 : 24] Because you see, when you think of the church and when you think of how, as our confession of faith puts it, how ordinarily salvation is not expected outside of the church.

And by that they meant that because the church is where you have the gospel preached, where you have God's people in testimony to God, where they gather for worship, where they belong to a

group of people who actually regularly familiarize themselves with the teaching of God's word, that is where you expect growth to begin and growth to develop and to continue.

That's where you expect people to come to be saved. So when you look out there and you find so many people that are not saved, as far as we can see, and whose lives give evidence that they don't want to be saved, that they don't want God in their lives, that they don't understand how important it is to have God in their lives.

And not only to have God in their lives, but to have God as a saviour God in their experience. What do you pray for? Well, you pray that they'll be converted. How are they going to be converted? Well, they're converted in the likes of Romans 10, for example, where Paul is emphasizing the importance of the gospel.

How shall they believe unless they hear the word? There's a whole string of elements put together there in Romans chapter 10.

[10:49] How shall they preach unless they be sent? How shall they hear except they have someone to declare the gospel to them? But this is how he finishes up. Faith comes by hearing and hearing the word of God, the word of Christ.

So that's got to be, you know, I think that faith comes ordinarily. Of course, God is the God of exceptions, but we mustn't actually build up our thinking on the basis of exceptions.

We have to think about what is the normal? What is God's norm? God's norm is the word. God's norm is the word preached. God's norm is the people of God gathered together, where faith comes by hearing, where the growth of faith comes by hearing, where people come themselves out of an interest to whatever brings them to hear the word.

Our prayer is that through hearing the word, they'll come to be saved. They'll come to be added to the church. You go to the book of Acts, that's what you really find, isn't it? That people came to join themselves to the little group that began, the group of disciples and those followers of Jesus, and they met together after his ascension.

And then prior to Pentecost, they were meeting together in one room. But then after the Spirit of God came down on the day of Pentecost, and the number of believers multiplied, what does it say?

[12:14] They were added to the church. When God saves people, they're added to the church, just as surely as he adds them to himself.

So that's got to be our vision, that a biblical attitude has to regard growth as normal, something that we pray for and should rightly expect.

We can't be satisfied at all in our lives with so many people still outside of the church, and so in the meantime, outside of salvation. We know that God is able to save them where they are, but that's not ordinarily what happens.

And so we have to lengthen our cords, we have to get into our minds increasingly as this new year approaches and develops, God willing, that we will not be satisfied till these pews are filled, till this building is too small.

That's what he's saying. Lengthen your cords. Of course God is not tied to numbers. God's presence is very often known and recognized where two or three are gathered together in his name.

[13:26] But you see, sometimes we find ourselves just so satisfied with while there are two or three that gather together in his name, and God is in the midst, and God's promises are there, yes, and God's word is there, yes, and God's presence is known there, yes.

That's fine. But let's plan for increase. Let's lengthen the cords. Let's realize that a diminishing church is not the norm in New Testament terms, in biblical terms.

We have a mandate from God to go and make disciples. And to make disciples means people coming to know the Lord, which is the most important thing, but being added to the church.

Sometimes you hear mistakenly that God's not interested in numbers. Well, there's a certain truth to that, and it certainly rings through and it gives a sense of encouragement, perhaps, to people who are struggling in their own place of service and are not seeing much sign of growth, and there are plenty of places like that today that we have to pray for and seek to assist, indeed, as much as you can.

Let's never think that that's really the norm, that a diminishing church in its diminishing is pleasing to God. Lengthen your cords.

[14:50] It's a biblical attitude. But secondly, in lengthening the cords, you have a biblical activity. We began with the attitude, but that is obviously leading to the activity.

There's always a case in the Bible, isn't it, of attitude leading to activity. You have to have the right mindset. You have to cultivate that right way of thinking, and that's what leads to the activity that God requires of us.

Well, what is a biblical activity? I'm going to mention two things briefly. First of all, regular attendance at worship. Now, I know that's not everything.

And I've frequently said that when we come to people and ask them, people who are not at all presently in the church and are outside of the church and the way they live, I'm not suggesting that the important thing is that they come to church.

But it is important that they come to church for the reasons I've just been mentioning. And so regular attendance at church is important, where the gospel is, where the word is preached, where God's people gather together, where other activities in relation to that take place.

[15:57] Of course, that can be misused as well. We could become a sermon-drinking congregation, a congregation where the majority were just turning up for church every Sunday, and that's about it.

I know that's not what we are. Thankfully, that's not what we are. We never want to become that. But it's possible to become that. It's possible to become that as an individual, that we just become sermon-tasters, sermon-drinkers, that we just turn up as a matter of routine or ritual, and that's it. We've done our Sunday duty, and that's we belong to the church. We belong to Stornway Free Church. That's as far as it goes. We're not like that, are we? We don't want to be like that, do we? No.

No. Because belonging to the church means that a regular attending is a real, meaningful, spiritual activity where you're bearing witness to the world as well as seeking to feed your own soul from regularity in worship.

Because that's where, that's where our doing for the Lord, that's where our service for the Lord in the wider sense, that's where it has to be anchored. That's where it has to be rooted.

[17:10] It's not what you're sour thinking. I know this is not how you're thinking, but I'm speaking to myself as I find a danger of falling into this unbiblical way of thinking. That it's alright just to belong formally to the church, and that's going to be okay for us, and that's going to ensure our own security, and we just tick the boxes.

Our service for the Lord, whatever we do for the Lord, has to be anchored in worship. Private worship, personal worship, and corporate worship.

Worship together. And the moment coming to church to worship God becomes a dull routine. I've got a problem in my soul if that's the case.

There's something wrong between me and God if coming regularly to miss worship is something that I don't really think is all important. That's where you have things rooted in the worship of God. That's where it's so encouraging for us to be together whenever we can to worship the Lord together, to make the time that He is worthy of so that we can regularly worship Him.

[18:23] Secondly, is reaching out to this biblical activity of regular attendance as part of lengthening your cords, preparing for growth. But there's also reaching out.

Take the gospel to people who don't come to the gospel themselves. Now you can do that in so many different ways. Not just hearing the gospel in church because if they're not in church you have to bring firstly the gospel to them and your witness.

Not just in speaking to them in the way you live of course as well. But it's largely, it's really largely, indeed this is what you find from scripture itself too, isn't it?

When you think of the dispersion of the church after the death of Stephen through persecution. We saw it recently they came to Antioch and on the way to Antioch and when they came to Antioch they began to speak about Jesus.

They communicated Christ and His centrality and His importance to those around them. In other words they began personal evangelism you might call it nowadays.

[19:27] but it's by far the most effective form of witness. The most effective form of evangelism. The most effective form of outreach is to build relationships with people.

Your neighbors, your work colleagues, your school friends, your fellow students, whatever. That's really where people see you. Where they get to know you.

Where they know what's important in your life. And they know you go to church what does that mean to them. That has to be communicated in your life and the practicalities of your life.

And so, so often what really has led to people giving serious attention to God's claims and to His existence and to the gospel is not a sermon.

It's the life that they've seen God's people live. The words they heard them use. The conversation. That's what we are called to do in lengthening the cords.

[20 : 27] So here is, first of all, lengthening the cords. Preparing. Get the right attitude. Prepare for growth. Think of it as a biblical attitude. A biblical mandate. A biblical norm, indeed, to think about growth.

And secondly, in a biblical activity, let's lengthen the cords. Let's prepare for that more increasingly. You're doing that already. I'm not talking to people who don't know what I'm talking about.

But I'm speaking to myself. Let's increasingly commit ourselves to the regular attendance and the reaching out that God requires of us as lengthening our cords.

That's the first thing. Secondly, more briefly, strengthening the stakes. Some of that has been covered already. But strengthening the stakes, if you're living in a tent and you're called upon to enlarge that tent or to add to it, of course you've got to lengthen the cords because you've more material then.

And you've also got to strengthen the stakes. You've got to make sure that the post, the little, or the large stakes that are going into the ground to hold the tent down firmly so the wind doesn't blow it away.

[21 : 35] You've got to make sure they're deep enough to take the strain, to deal with the increase. What he's saying to us is strengthen your stakes.

as important as it is to think of lengthening the cords, to prepare for growth in the sense in which I've been speaking of, it's also important to strengthen the stakes, to be more firmly embedded in the things you believe, in the things that are important foundationally for your life spiritually and for our life as a congregation.

That involves three things. I must be brief. First of all, a personal growth. Because this is speaking to us personally. Every single one of us, whether we're preachers or hearers or whatever our role is in the church.

If we're really serious about lengthening the cords, about seeking growth for the church as we are, then we have to be serious about strengthening the stakes, about our own lives being more firmly rooted in Christ and being daily something that we work at in terms of personal growth.

So, here is something I put to myself as I come to the end of this year and I approach a new year. I'm saying this to you as something I commend as well as arising out of this passage.

[22 : 57] Be even more prayerful. Be even more committed to holiness. Be even more concerned for your fellow Christians. Be even more in regard for that lost world out there that doesn't know what it is to be saved.

That don't know God and that don't want to hear about God. Be more committed to those who lead certain activities in the church.

Pray for them. Give thanks for them. Those who work with young people, those who work with people who have addictions of various kinds.

who regularly give of their time and of their gifts towards helping them. Personal growth. Drive down the tent pegs of your own life.

That's what I say to myself. I hope I've said that to myself and I have before I've ever come to this pulpit to say it to you in preaching the gospel. Drive down the tent pegs of your own life.

[24 : 02] Because you see, before we fulfill that mandate to go and make disciples, we have to know God and to know more of God.

You can't think of going without, first of all, knowing. You know how frustrating it is. Well, I find it frustrating anyway. You go into a shop, you're looking at something that you're interested in and the shop assistant comes along and you take this, whatever it is, and you say, you tell me a bit more about this.

Does it have this or does it have that? Oh, I don't know anything about that. And you say, well, is this the department you work in? Well, yes, but I'll need to get somebody else to tell me. That's somebody who's not rightly trained. How frustrating is it to go to a shop, ask about something you're interested in and the shop assistant in that department says, well, I actually don't know much about that.

You'll need to go and speak to somebody else. Before we go, we have to know. And in order to know, we actually work at our own growth personally.

We strengthen the stakes of our lives personally. And then there's a positive belief that's required as well as personal growth, a positiveness in our belief.

[25 : 12] Because we need to think more about not just a, what we are encouraged to do practically, but be positive in holding fast. You see, it's not enough for us simply to think of defending the doctrine of the gospel.

of the gospel, defending the doctrine of Christ, of salvation in him, of faith, bringing justification, all these things that are foundational. Of course, we defend all of these and whenever aberrations of that occur, we have to actually act against that or speak against it or whatever or actually say, well, that's not true to the gospel.

But more than that, required not just to defend the gospel, but to positively commend it to people in our day. Because Hebrews 10, for example, verse 23, speaks about hold fast the confession of your hope or of your faith.

Knowing that he is faithful who has promised. It's not depending on our own ability, on our own level of commitment. It depends ultimately on God's faithfulness.

But as you stand on God's faithfulness and know God's faithfulness and as you go as a disciple to seek to make other disciples, you go positively and with a positiveness about the gospel.

[26 : 35] Because, sadly, in our day, we see people getting rather frustrated that the gospel isn't as effective as they would want it to be. And you find even prominent church people in leadership of the church turning from, you might call this an evangelical or reformed standpoint that's true to the gospel and then bringing in all sorts of other modern stuff that I get from the world and the thinking of the world and ideas of equality and of all of that sort of stuff that comes from the thinking of the world that brings all of that into the political arena as well.

Well, that's come to be, sadly, on the part of some embraced as church leaders and come to be preached as part of the gospel. You have to be positive and certain about what you believe.

When Paul wrote to the Romans, he lived in a world where there were many alternatives to the gospel as there are in our day. Not just alternatives to the gospel but long established alternatives, the wisdom of the Greeks, the influence of the Roman Empire and Roman thinking.

But as he wrote to the church in Rome, Paul was saying, I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes.

What was he meaning? What did he mean by saying, I'm not ashamed of the gospel? He says, what he means is, I take every alternative to the gospel that exists in the world and I hold the gospel unashamedly above them because it's superior to them and it is still God's power to salvation.

[28 : 19] However, many people remain unsaved. Sadly, as you go forth in the name of Jesus, be assured and be positive that you have the gospel, that you have the power of God unto salvation in the gospel you commend.

Don't ever lose your confidence in the gospel. whatever reactions you meet with, whatever developments you see in our day. And a church that's committed to growth cannot be ambivalent about the gospel and about the doctrines of the gospel but positive in communicating it.

And the third thing in strengthening the stakes along with personal growth and positive belief is promoting unity. That too is important to growth.

Remember when Paul was writing to the Philippians for example, if I can just point you to one passage, to the Philippians in chapter 1, Paul was in prison when he wrote to the Philippians and he was concerned for them and concerned that they continue to live the gospel in their lives and live according to Christ and the standard.

Only he says, he was talking, remember about being not quite sure about whether he was going to die or be put to death or whether he would continue for some further time.

[29 : 40] Anyway, he says, let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ so that whether I come and see you or else I'm absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit and with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel and not frightened in anything by your opponents.

but you see, striving together for the faith of the gospel. In other words, their presentation of the gospel, their living out of the gospel was not merely on an individual level.

They were to strive together in living out the gospel. They were to make every effort in a unity together to be effective for God.

We are grateful for the unity that we have as a congregation. It's something that we, of course, rightly value and by we, I mean all of us, not just those of us in leadership in the congregation. That's something that can become a source of pride that we would take pride in that unity that we possess and we don't want that. Unity is created by God although we are responsible for looking after it.

[31 : 09] And there's no sense of pride in it. It's not by our achievement. God's blessing is what provides the unity at source. But we have to promote that unity to maintain it, to look after it carefully, especially to watch for the encroachments of the evil one.

And any influence that would actually disrupt and spoil that unity is destructive of the gospel. We don't just enjoy it together as a congregation.

We enjoy unity in the sense of being one with other denominations that hold the gospel precious as well. We're not being insular in saying that we prize unity but we're prizing it as a congregation because that's where our responsibility begins and it grows out from that.

So 2019, God willing, as it's about to dawn upon us, let's make it a year for lengthening the cords and strengthening the stakes to live out that mindset that we are mandated to hold in the gospel where growth is to be seen as normal, where we strive for it, where we commit ourselves to regular attendance and to reaching out, where we strengthen the stakes, where we drive down the tent pegs of our lives in personal growth, in positive belief, and in promoting of unity.

God bless these thoughts for us today. Let's conclude with singing in Psalm 115, Psalm 115 on page 153 verses 9 to 15.

[33 : 06] O house of Israel, place your trust upon the Lord alone. He is the mighty help and shield of all who are His own. Psalm 115, the version of it on page 153 and singing verses 9 to 50.

O house of Israel, place your trust upon the Lord. O house of Israel, the Lord alone.

He is the mighty help and shield of all who are His own.

O house of Israel, O house of Israel, O house of Israel, trust the Lord. He is their help and shield.

All you who fear Him, trust the Lord. He is your help and shield.

[34 : 27] O house of Israel, and He will bless us all. The Lord remembers Israel, and He will bless us all.

O house of Israel, and He will bless me. The Lord's heart of Israel, He will bless you, serve Him, and He will bless you, Tain God dear Lord.

O9 Chaos of Israel, this year you are using to enjoy. Both of you and all your life.

May you be blessed by God who makes all things by his design.

I'll go to the main door after the benediction. Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you now and evermore.

[35 : 39] Amen.