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SEASONAL GUIDE

— LOCKDOWN EDITION —



INTRODUCING SEASONAL GUIDE

THE ROAD TO RENEWAL

There's a theme in the scriptures that transformation often happens away from home. Think of Paul on the road to Damascus, the disciples on the road to Emmaus, and the Israelites lost in the desert. These times when we are far from the familiar are often the spaces where God brings us to confession, a new depth of obedience, or revives a fire in our hearts which once seemed only embers.

Strangely, one of the most 'away from home' experiences we may have for decades is a time when we are literally housebound.

And yet there's an unfamiliarity in this space. Some will feel a challenge to their identity as they are without the work that gives

their lives meaning. Others will be stretched to their end by the needs of their children and the challenge to be patient. Further still, some will face challenges to access the most basic things of food, medicine and safety.

In this Seasonal Guide, we will be asking the question, "Jesus, what is the far away from home journey you want to lead us on during lockdown?" We are going to walk through these unfamiliar roads, asking God what works of conviction, obedience, and revival she wants to bring about in us.

THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS

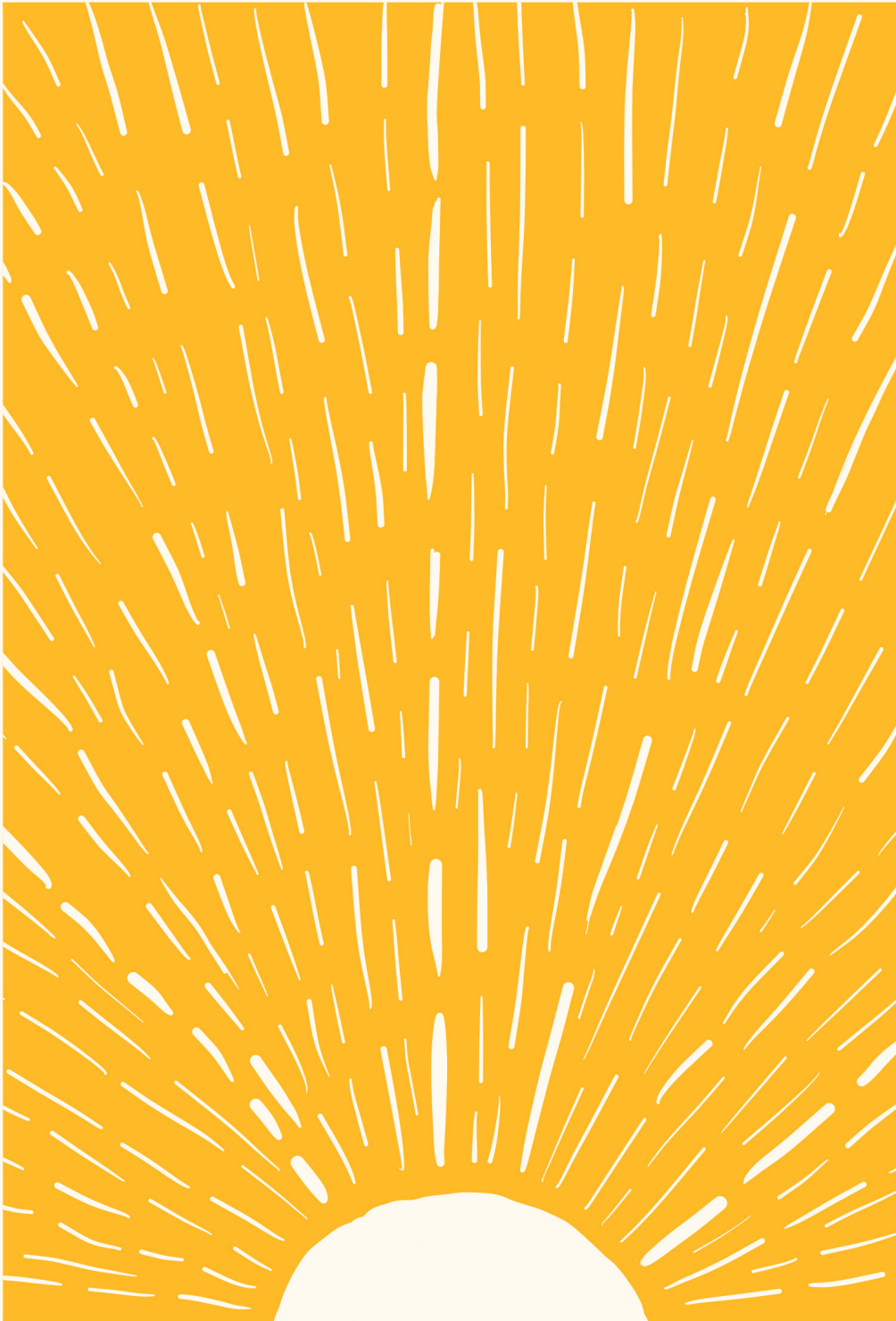
Acts 9:1-9

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.



REFLECTIONS

In this passage we find Saul beginning his transformation. On the road to Damascus he is interrupted by the presence of God, and God has a question: ‘Why are you persecuting me?’ He is left blinded by the interaction, but is given some clear instructions. Saul is not being forced to follow them, but invited to. We later learn that he does follow them, and in doing so, has a life-altering transformation. What at first could have been perceived as a tragedy - losing his sight - turned into the most significant moment of his life.

Viktor Frankl, writing after the insanity of the holocaust, reminded people that we don’t have the freedom to choose our difficulties, but we do have the freedom to select our responses.

Saul leaned into the invitation for change. Instead of trying

to find his own way out of the circumstance he found himself in, he trusted the voice that had blinded him in the first place.

In the past month, the world has been turned on its axis. In the midst of that madness, many of us are presented with the uncomfortable reality of silence. The silence can be scary - and it is tempting to drown it out with distractions.

But what would happen if we, like Saul, chose to lean into the disruption?

Often, it isn’t until we go silent that our sin is revealed to us.

In our own silence, are we able to allow God to ask us the same question: ‘Why are you persecuting me?’

Many of us may never have answered that question of ourselves – or even thought we were offending God. But our sin

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is always there; it fights against the coming of God’s reign of justice and love. In doing so, persecutes his cause. We now have the opportunity, to ask God to reveal our sin while the world around us is quiet.

Victor Frankl argued that finding meaning in the time of suffering came down to three things – the work we offer, the love we give and, most importantly, the ability to display courage in the face of suffering. It is courageous to use the silence to ask God to reveal our flaws. It is courageous to answer the question: ‘Why are you persecuting me?’

QUESTIONS

01 How has this time of lockdown interrupted your life? How does that feel?

02 Where is God inviting you to “lean in” to this disruption?

03 What practical action would courage look like for you in this moment?

NOTES

THE ROAD TO THE PROMISED LAND

Exodus 6:1-11

Then the Lord said to Moses, “Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh: Because of my mighty hand he will let them go; because of my mighty hand he will drive them out of his country.”

God also said to Moses, “I am the Lord. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty, ut by my name the Lord I did not make myself fully known to them. I also established my covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, where they resided as foreigners. Moreover, I have heard the groaning of the Israelites, whom the Egyptians are enslaving, and I have remembered my covenant.

“Therefore, say to the Israelites: ‘I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of



judgment. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. And I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. I will give it to you as a possession. I am the Lord.”

Moses reported this to the Israelites, but they did not listen to him because of their discouragement and harsh labor.

Then the Lord said to Moses, “Go, tell Pharaoh king of Egypt to let the Israelites go out of his country.”

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The journey to the Promised Land shouldn't have taken long – some say even as short as eleven days. Yet after their rescue from Egypt the people of God walked around the desert for 40 years!

Because God needed to develop hearts in the people that could be good stewards of the freedom he was about to give them. He needed them to lay down their old Egyptian slave identity and to learn to be his children again. As in Exodus 3:7, “I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.”

The people go through hunger, thirst, disillusionment, fear and frustration. Their journey is a litany of failures. And yet all the time God is shaping and moulding their hearts to be his chosen people again. They needed

to learn new ways of living and new customs, and they needed to learn to trust God and to obey him.

During my own season of depression, I felt that the voice of God had disappeared. I used to be able to hear him clearly, and suddenly it was like one of my senses had been taken away from me. In this place, I had to learn a new depth of trust in God. No longer to trust him only as a warm feeling in my heart, but as an undeniable and non-emotional reality like gravity or oxygen. When the feelings eventually returned, I could see that God had been with me when I couldn't see him, and I had learned to be his child in a new and deeper way.

In the thick of this lockdown season there will be hunger, thirst, disillusionment, fear and frustration. And yet God invites us again to learn a deeper knowing, a more powerful trust, and a more passionate obedience.

QUESTIONS

01 Where do you sense an opportunity to obey God more in the lockdown?

02 Where are you aware of hunger, thirst, disillusionment, fear or frustration?

03 What does it look like practically to obey God amid those feelings?

NOTES

THE ROAD IN THE WASTELAND

————— Isaiah 43:16 —————

This is what the Lord says — he who made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters, who drew out the chariots and horses, the army and reinforcements together, and they lay there, never to rise again, extinguished, snuffed out like a wick:

“Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland. The wild animals honour me, the jackals and the owls, because I provide water in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland, to give drink to my people, my chosen, the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise.”

REFLECTIONS

One day soon the shutters on shop doors will be pulled up, planes will start roaring their engines, and workplaces will fill with chatter again. When the cogs of the world start to turn, we will emerge from our houses and go back to our busyness. But in all likelihood, we will be emerging into a world which has changed.

Political pundits are using words like 'recession' and 'depression' when talking about the months to come. The words give a gloomy and dire feeling that this season may stretch beyond our four-week lockdown. It is easy to be consumed by this negativity. But, as this week's passage from Isaiah reminds us, God likes to bring about new things from the wasteland.

Dorothy Day once said that Christians are called to live a life that doesn't make sense unless

God exists. In these uncertain times our lives and our language should look more different than ever before. Instead of being weighed down, we should be reminded - and reminding others - that God is renewing the earth and reconciling all things to himself.

To others this hope may not make sense. It is likely things will get worse before they get better. But as God commanded Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, Moses was called to tell a story of liberation before liberation was realised - we too are called to do the same.

Many people will be tied up in thinking upon the former things in coming weeks. The ways things were. The things they once had. We too are at risk of this. Forgetting the former things in the knowledge that something different is on horizon was vital for Isaiah, and it is vital for us now.

REFLECTIONS

The strategy of Jesus is not centered in taking the right stand on issues, but rather standing in the right place. In this time, we need to be making sure we are standing in the right place. Standing in our hope, not our suffering. Standing in our community, not our isolation. Standing in our love, not our fear. In doing so, we will be better placed to perceive the new thing that is coming and help others to see it too.

THE ROAD TO EMMAUS

— Luke 24:13-35 —

Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognising him.

He asked them, “What are you discussing together as you walk along?”

They stood still, their faces downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, “Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?”

“What things?” he asked.

“About Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied. “He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him;

but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus."

He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus continued on as if he were going farther. But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them.

When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognised him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"

They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, "It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon." Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognised by them when he broke the bread.

REFLECTIONS

In the aftermath of Jesus' death, two crestfallen disciples walk alongside one another towards the town of Emmaus. They are consoling each other that the hope of a revolution against the powers of Rome had ended. The one they had thought was their Messiah had suffered the most humiliating of deaths, and now all they could do is return home to their normal jobs and lives.

A man begins walking alongside them. Strangely, he seems to have no idea what has happened. It's like he's been living under a rock... or in lockdown with no internet. They ask him, "Don't you know what's happened over these last few days?!" Literally everyone knew, how could he not?

The man replied by offering them a bigger story than the pain they've been living in. Starting at Abraham, he talked of the

covenant with Israel, then of the freedom God gave the captives in Egypt. Finally, he talked of the prophecies of Isaiah, which said that God's own son would have to die for the liberation of the world. Afterwards, he took the Eucharist, and suddenly they realised who they were speaking to. It was Jesus. They turned to each other and said, "Didn't our hearts burn within us when he spoke to us?"

I can think of many times in my own journey where I've become stuck in the small stories I'm living. Frustration, pain, and fear creep in. And yet, so many times Jesus has drawn alongside me and gradually... gently... I have felt my heart begin to burn within me. Christ has lifted my gaze from the temporary struggle and revived me to remember what it is to follow the risen Jesus.

REFLECTIONS

For many of us, we may find the only story we tell at the moment is lockdown. COVID-19 is the black hole conversation we are all sucked into again and again. Our world can become very small. And yet, as always, Jesus is walking alongside us asking if we will recognise him; offering revival to our tired spirits, and for our hearts to burn passionately within us again to follow him.

QUESTIONS

01 What might be a small story you are stuck thinking about at the moment?

02 Where do you sense Jesus drawing alongside you?

03 Take a few minutes of quiet. Pray for one another that the Holy Spirit will come and revive your hearts.

