

- Life isn't a steady trudge from cradle to grave. There are ups and downs, mountains and valleys. Life is not predictable or controllable. We have to learn to trust God in each season.
- Recognising our season and the seasons others are in is very important.
- Embrace the season you are in – whether mourning or dancing. Lean into it. Learn what God wants you to learn in it.
- The season will pass. When it does, make sure you move on and don't get stuck.

Some 4-Seasons chapters.

Here are some key Bible chapters for the seasons: (Obviously the passages we looked at in the studies were useful, but the passages below are passages we should mull over like a cow chews a cud.) Read the chapter with your season in mind and also remember that parts of the passage will be clear straight away, other parts will take time. Bear in mind the work of each season as you read.

Winter: James 1	Spring: Romans 12
Summer: John 15	Autumn: Matthew 25

Some key questions to ask...

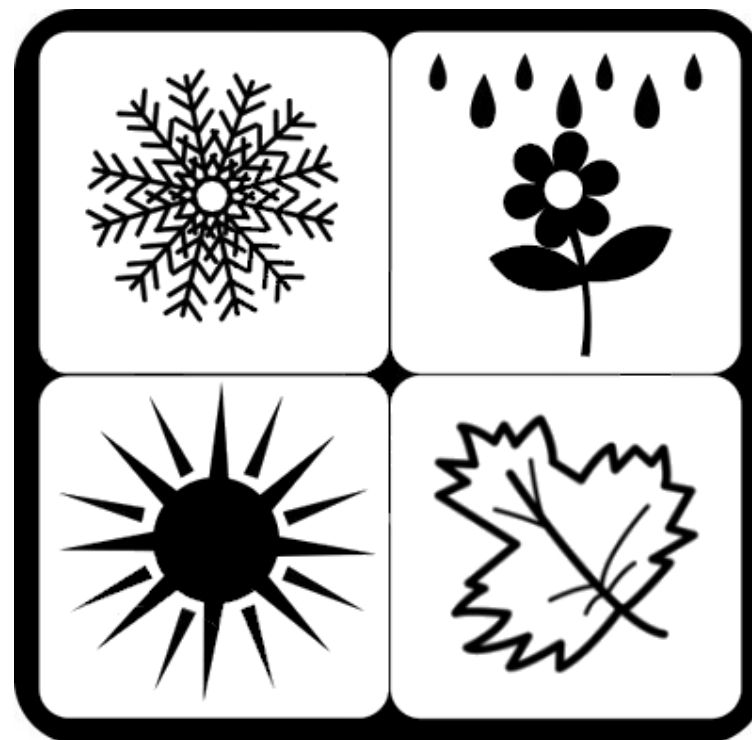
1. What season am I in?
2. How did I get to this season? What events and actions by me or others brought me here? How should I respond to these events? Do I need to give thanks? Do I need to repent? Do I need to let go and forgive? Do I need to mourn or dance?
3. What do I believe God wants to teach me in this season?
4. Can I see God in this season? Is He on the cross next to me? Is He busting open my grave? Is He tending me like a vine? Or is He refining me like gold?
5. What is the work I must get done in this season?
Write down some practical steps to take in the next few hours & days.
6. Can I see the value of this season and be content in it?
7. Who can I share my journey with? Share with someone who won't judge but will pray for you and hold you accountable for the journey through your season.
8. Prayerfully ask God to accompany you through your season.

----- Soli Deo Gloria -----

"Seasons of the Soul" Bible Study Series

(Based on "Spiritual Rhythm: Being with Jesus every Season of your Soul" by Mark Buchanan)

A Group Study exploring the different seasons of our lives and how Jesus is with us in each of these seasons.



Name: _____

obsessively look for all the symptoms or become legalistic about the work and dangers. Moderation, caution, discernment and wise counsel should be the order of the day.

Some ways to maximise the value of the Season's Course.

- Remember that the seasons are a framework and a tool. Not a recipe or a straitjacket. Wherever we may find ourselves, the seasons framework will offer some useful insights and some not-so-useful insights. Chew the meat – spit out the bones.
- Be like the men of Issachar: “who understood the times and knew what Israel should do.” (1Chr12³²) When we know our season, we are better equipped to respond appropriately. Schedule and set aside some time, maybe 45 minutes on a Sunday afternoon (after your nap!) and work through your seasons material. See if there is a season that makes sense for where you find yourself. Look at work that is required and put some concrete steps in place to respond to your season. Don't become obsessive about the season, keep the balance. On the other hand, don't ignore the opportunity to maximise the season's benefit.
- When the “Season's Symptoms” don't help us identify the season, then the “Season's Work” can often be a clue... Which set of tasks, if you are very honest with yourself feel the most urgent and most appropriate now? That will be your season.
- Share your season insights with your spouse or a trusted friend/mentor to increase your accountability for doing the season's work.
- Be very aware that God is significantly present in each season:
 - In winter His presence is faint, but we learn that we can hang onto Him. He is the **crucified Jesus**, experiencing our struggle with us.
 - In spring He is the **resurrected Christ**, victorious and glorious conquering the effects of sin and death in our lives.
 - In summer He is the **Vine and the Gardener** who tends the vine. We can do nothing without Him, but He's also tending us so that we grow much fruit.
 - In autumn He is the **Refiner** of gold and silver. (See Mal.3³ and 1Pet1⁷) He wants to collect a harvest from us. He is also the Spirit who gives us the resolve to repent or to plant an even better crop.
- In his book “Simplify” Bill Hybels also talks about Seasons. His definitions of seasons are much broader than the four earth seasons. He looks at Ecclesiastes 3 (which we looked at in the intro) where there are 28 seasons! This is also a useful insight. In his book Hybels points out the following:

Autumn

In Autumn we reflect on reaping a harvest. We gather seed for the next season, celebrate God's bounty and we let things become compost.

<u>Autumn's Symptoms</u> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. The sense of reckoning at reaching the end of a chapter in our lives.2. Awareness of success or failure and the need to respond to that in thanksgiving or repentance.3. An awareness or foreboding of winter coming.	<u>Autumn's Work</u> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Reflection and Evaluation.2. Choosing the seeds we plant next.3. Celebration or Repentance.4. Letting some leaves fall.5. Stocking up for winter.
	<u>Autumn's Gift</u> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Community that can encourage us.2. God's Spirit working in us.3. A renewed focus and awareness of God at work in our lives.

Frequently Asked Questions...

- "I don't know which season I am in." Sometimes it is very difficult to determine which season we're in. This is often happens when we are between seasons and there are also times in our lives where we feel the seasons very vaguely.
- "Do I have to experience the seasons in sequence?" No. It is possible to plunge from Spring or Summer into Winter and skip Autumn. As with physical seasons where Summer and Winter are dominant and Spring and Autumn can be quick and fleeting, the same can be true in the seasons of the soul.
- "It feels like I'm experiencing multiple seasons. Is that possible?" Sometimes we can have a winter season in our health (e.g. undergoing chemotherapy) but spiritually we are strong. Then one is experiencing both winter and summer. This happens especially when we are carried in people's' prayers.
- "Does a sad event or setback mean I have to be in winter?" No. Our physical, emotional or material circumstances could be tough, but our souls could be in a good place. The opposite could be true: our emotions and physical state could be really good but we are at winter in our souls.
- "Are some seasons better/worse than others?" "Should I feel guilty or inferior for being in winter and is it better to be in summer?" No. Each season serves a purpose and each season adds value to our lives.
- "Can this season thing can lead to a sort of spiritual hypochondria?" Yes, there could. One should not over-do or over-emphasise this idea of seasons. For example, if I think I am in winter then I shouldn't

Introduction.

Seasons... We experience them each year and some stand out more than others...

I remember arriving in Pretoria in May 1997 to one of the coldest winters ever and we had a three day power-cut at our new home because the complex's transformer burnt out. I got all our camping gear out and we boiled water and cooked food on gas. (This helped us make friends with all our new neighbours as we could offer them hot coffee or tea as we faced adversity together.)

Seasons pose unique challenges and offer us different gifts.

In our emotional and spiritual lives we also encounter seasons...

Mark Buchanan, a well-known author and pastor from Canada, has contemplated this idea and written about it in his significant book "Spiritual Rhythm: Being with Jesus every Season of your Soul."¹

To set the scene, here are a few words from Buchanan's introduction in which he describes the illness and death of his co-pastor, Carol:

I led well, I think, during her dying and her death. I was brave. I spoke words of comfort and hope, publicly and privately. At her funeral I preached a message to stir and bolster faith...

And then I woke one morning barren of fruit, bereft of joy, short of daylight. I could not shake it off. I could not make a thing grow. I saw a counsellor. I had people pray for me. I begged God. I faked it.

Nothing ended it.

And then God gave me insight: this was winter. It would end, in time, but not by my own doing. My responsibility was simply to know the season and match my actions and inactions to it.

He further notes that:

I had worked for many years with rickety logic: religious busyness is the same thing as spiritual maturity...

And then I saw it, hidden in plain sight: if we are to bear much fruit – if that's the goal of the Christian life – then the best model for spiritual maturity is seasons. Fruit grows in seasons, and all seasons are necessary for growing it. And seasons are as much about what is not happening as what is. It has as much to do with inactivity as with activity, waiting as with working, barrenness as with abundance, dormancy as with vitality. For everything there is a season.

¹ This study makes use of Mark Buchanan's book with quotations from the relevant chapters put in *italics*. For each season I have selected a passage of Scripture that I think shows the season at work in the life of a biblical character. (Theo Groeneveld.)

The Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes offers similar wisdom:

There is a time for everything,
 and a season for every activity under heaven:
² a time to be born and a time to die,
 a time to plant and a time to uproot,
³ a time to kill and a time to heal,
 a time to tear down and a time to build,
⁴ a time to weep and a time to laugh,
 a time to mourn and a time to dance,
⁵ a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,
 a time to embrace and a time to refrain,
⁶ a time to search and a time to give up,
 a time to keep and a time to throw away,
⁷ a time to tear and a time to mend,
 a time to be silent and a time to speak,
⁸ a time to love and a time to hate,
 a time for war and a time for peace.
⁹ What does the worker gain from his toil? ¹⁰ I have seen the burden God
 has laid on men and women. ¹¹ He has made everything beautiful in its
 time. He has also set eternity in their hearts; yet they cannot fathom
 what God has done from beginning to end. (Ecc.3:1-11)

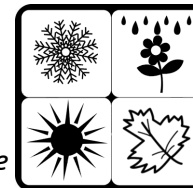
Throughout the book Buchanan reminds us that Jesus is the “Man for all seasons” and that we should learn to walk closely with Him in all the seasons of life.

The four studies here will acquaint us with the nature, work, guidelines and pitfalls of each season. We hope you will enjoy the journey.

Questions for Discussion.

1. Share your memories of a particular weather season in your past. Was it a lovely summer holiday? A beautiful autumn? A strikingly memorable spring? Or a memory-making winter?
2. Do you think Mark is correct in identifying religious busyness as false maturity? Why do you think we fall into this “rickety logic”?
3. Mark suggests that fruit grows out of a process of seasons in our lives... The writer of Ecclesiastes suggests the same... Why do you think fruit needs seasons? Why does the author talk of the “burden” that we cannot “fathom”?
4. Discuss Mark's statement: “...seasons are as much about what is not happening as what is...”
5. What does the promise: “He has made everything beautiful in its time” mean to you?

Process Tool: Seasons of the Soul.



Winter.

This is the season where we experience hardship, frozen-ness and a sense of uselessness and dormancy in the soul. But it can be a place of vital growth.

<u>Winter's Symptoms</u>	<u>Winter's Work</u>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Feeling God is absent (He is not) 2. Feeling alone (You are not) 3. Sense of death/uselessness. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Prayer (and Faith) 2. Pruning (Simplifying) 3. Waiting (Caterpillar to Butterfly)
<u>Winter's Gifts</u>	<u>Winter's Dangers</u>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A new me (Dark rings in the tree) 2. New perspective (Heavenly minded) 3. Playful simplicity. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Feeling guilty – blaming self. 2. Withdrawing – from God & people. 3. Falling into real depression.

Spring

Spring is vindication after winter. It's the new life after the deathliness of winter. It's the time to plow and plant and can mark the start of new things.

<u>Spring's Symptoms</u>	<u>Spring's Work</u>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Renewal: New life in all areas. 2. Vindication: Breakthrough. 3. Highway: Hard things become easier 4. Homecoming: A sense of belonging. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Plowing (hard, future focused) 2. Planting (take risks, try new things) 3. Cleaning (clear junk and clutter)
<u>Spring's Gifts</u>	<u>Spring's Dangers</u>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Beauty: the “joy of our salvation” 2. High levels of energy & motivation 3. Opportunity for big forward steps 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. We can sleep through it. 2. Neglecting the work. 3. Getting addicted to the bounty.

Summer

Summer is the time of good growth and easy wins, but has some dangers...

<u>Summer's Symptoms and Gifts</u>	<u>Summer's Work</u>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Abundance: Light, warmth, water, growth, holidays and joy. 2. A turn-around of winter. 3. Flow and Fruitfulness. 4. God feels close, clear and real. 5. Can come after an upheaval. 6. A taste of the KINGdom. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Enjoy and Grow Strong. 2. Rhythm: Unhurried, Un-anxious, and Fruitful. 3. Giving First-fruits to God.
	<u>Summer's Dangers</u>
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Nostalgia – Stuck in the past. 2. Consumerism – Can't get enough. 3. Dehydration – forget to refill. 4. Leafiness – more leaves than fruit.

3. Take time to **celebrate and give thanks to God**. Acknowledge Him as the Giver of Everything and count your blessings. Celebrate His goodness and commemorate His kindness.

4. **Let go of some things**. Consider that there may be some things in your life that have fulfilled their purpose. They are like the autumn leaves on a tree. Admire their beauty, but then let them drift to the ground to become the fuel for the new growth that is coming. Trees also drop unpicked fruit that is often bird-pecked or starting to rot.

5. **Prepare for winter**. One of the purposes of the Thanksgiving/Harvest Feast is to fatten up the feasters for winter's cold. What are the things you were short of in your last spiritual winter? Some roots in God's Word? Good habits of prayer? Reliable and wise Christian friends? Get these things in place.

Questions for Discussion.

3. What do they have to "give careful thought" to? Notice the different focus each time this phrase is used.
4. How does the temple connect to "soul harvest"? Look at Isaiah 2²⁻³ ...
5. In the passage identify the interplay between material and spiritual seeds on the one hand and material and spiritual harvests on the other.
6. If the harvest is good, we celebrate and give thanks. The Israelite harvest is bad. What do they do? What will they do in 4 years' time?
7. What are some of the pretty leaves (and rotten fruit) that they must allow to die?
8. What might they need to do in order to "fatten themselves up?"

Autumn's Comfort.

Autumn's comfort is significant. We are not alone. We have community to support us and we have God's Spirit to empower us. We don't have to repeat the failures of the past and we can face the uncertainties of coming winters, because He is at work in us.

Questions for Discussion.

9. How do the Israelites benefit from community and the Spirit's power?
10. "The roots of our present failures lie in our past successes." (Peter Drucker) How could this apply to the lessons of Autumn?

Conclusion.

Autumn is a time of reflection, evaluation and redirection. It involves looking back at planting and nurturing. It harvests and stores in the present, but is focused toward a fruitful future. Please look at the "season's process tool" reflect and **act** on it.

Pray for each other as you commit to "give careful thought to your ways."

Study 1: Winter.

Learning about Winter.

When one discusses seasons of the soul, it is winter "that most intrigues us, and I hazard the guess that it's because it's little understood and often hidden away."

Winter shames those in it. It feels like personal failure, something we've caused, or missed, or faltered in. We hide ourselves for being there. We're sure it's our fault. We wonder if we're crazy, lazy, stupid... And most people around us don't help. They pep-talk us. They serve up warmed over platitudes. They scold us or offer useless advice..."



Winter is being "barren of fruit, bereft of joy, and short of daylight." It's as though full colour suddenly becomes grayscale. Everything feels dreary and meaningless. We are purpose-starved, accomplishments lose significance and our hearts are dull to beauty, courage and sacrifice.

One might be tempted to see depression and winter as one and the same but it is important to note that winter is usually caused by external circumstances and will pass in time whereas depression has internal causes and often requires intervention to manage it.

[Winter] has power to eclipse all the good we've stored up, and to plunge us into a night-time that seems all we've ever known and, worse, all we'll ever know... Winter hides God. It has power to sever my knowledge about God from my experience of Him, and to hold the two apart, so that my theology and my reality become irreconcilable.

Winter isolates us, others don't understand where we are, we feel we have to fake it – we feel we have to pretend that we are flourishing.

The sense of death and failure that winter carries with it can be devastating. When we look at a leafless tree in seasonal winter, we find it almost impossible to believe that it will be leafy and bearing fruit in a few months. We are overwhelmed by lifelessness.

Winter is struggling with:

- feeling as though God is absent;
- loneliness (no one really understands what we are going through);
- and the sense of death in our soul.

It's as though our theology says one thing, our experience says another.

Elijah the prophet finds himself in winter. For years he has been God's lone voice in Israel. He has been faithful to God and bold in standing up against an evil king. But now Jezebel wants to kill him and suddenly winter arrives. Let's have a look at his winter symptoms in 1 Kings 19:

³ Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, ⁴ while he himself went a day's journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, LORD," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors."

⁵ Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep. All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat." ⁶ He looked around, and there by his head was a cake of bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again.

⁷ The angel of the LORD came back a second time and touched him and said, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." ⁸ So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. ⁹ There he went into a cave and spent the night.

And the word of the LORD came to him: "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

¹⁰ He replied, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too."

¹¹ The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by."

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. ¹² After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper.

¹³ When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

¹⁴ He replied, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too."

¹⁵ The LORD said to him, "Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. ¹⁶ Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. ¹⁷ Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu. ¹⁸ Yet I reserve seven thousand in

¹² Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the whole remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the LORD their God and the message of the prophet Haggai, because the LORD their God had sent him. And the people feared the LORD.

¹³ Then Haggai, the LORD's messenger, gave this message of the LORD to the people: "I am with you," declares the LORD. ¹⁴ So the LORD stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of the whole remnant of the people. They came and began to work on the house of the LORD Almighty, their God, ¹⁵ on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month in the second year of King Darius.

Questions for Discussion.

1. This autumn in Israel's life could also be described as a *reckoning*. What are the seeds that were sown and what harvest are they reaping and storing? How long did it take for Haggai's message to gain traction?
2. How is God portrayed in v.8-11? This contrasts with the paragraph on "feasting and thanksgiving" in the description above? How and Why?

Autumn's Work

There are a couple of important things to do in autumn:

1. **Consider your harvest.** If you're harvesting (reaping the fruit of your sowing and labour), whether the harvest is good, disappointing or bad, you are in autumn and it is a time for reflection and adjustment. Evaluate where you find yourself. Think through the things that went right or wrong. "*Give careful thought to your ways...*"
2. **Pick the seeds you want to sow** for future harvests that God wants you to gather. Mark suggests we pick seeds for three important harvests:
 - The Harvest of Souls: Reaching others for Christ. We should be *looking, praying and going* out into our world to reach others⁴.
 - The Harvest of Prosperity: God wants us to harvest well – to prosper. Mark notes that physical and spiritual prosperity are interlinked. Sometimes we sow spiritually and reap materially and vice versa. There are no hard and fast rules (and no "health and wealth" theologies) to be made except *that generosity brings good harvest*. Mark notes that all the most fruitful, winsome and "nice-to-be-with-people" in his life have been generous spiritually and materially.
 - A Harvest of Righteousness: Simply put – we must become more like Jesus. Whatever our circumstances have been – and sometimes God allows tough circumstances – we should be more like Jesus.

⁴ This is a big emphasis in Mark's book and is well-worth looking at.

acknowledge God as provider: rain-maker, sun-keeper, storm-quencher. Thanksgiving reminds us of our dependence on God. *To refuse the feast is to refuse the bounty, which is to refuse the gift, which is to refuse the Giver.*

3. Autumn is about **death of things no longer needed**. During autumn leaves fall from the trees and become the compost that fuels the next summer's growth. In the same way autumn can be about letting things go that have served their purpose.

4. Autumn is about **preparing for winter**. Mark checks his firewood pile when the first autumn chill comes along. He's been piling wood in his pile from his gardening activities all summer, but in autumn he checks his pile and orders more wood if he thinks he may run out....

An Autumn in Scripture.

The exiled Israelites were allowed to return to Jerusalem in 538BC. They started rebuilding the temple in 536BC but they experienced opposition and stopped building. Sixteen years later, in 520BC the prophet Haggai challenged them to re-think their situation and the people responded by rebuilding the temple which was completed four years later...

¹ In the second year of King Darius, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest:

² This is what the LORD Almighty says: "These people say, 'The time has not yet come for the LORD's house to be built.'"

³ Then the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: ⁴ "Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?"

⁵ Now this is what the LORD Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. ⁶ You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it."

⁷ This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways.

⁸ Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored," says the LORD. ⁹ "You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?" declares the LORD Almighty. "Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with his own house.

¹⁰ Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops. ¹¹ I called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain, the new wine, the oil and whatever the ground produces, on men and cattle, and on the labor of your hands."

Israel--all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him." (1 Kings 19:3-18)

Questions for Discussion.

1. Which of the descriptions and symptoms of winter as described earlier do you identify with?
2. How does Elijah express the three symptoms or struggles of winter?

What is Winter's Work?

Mark learned that there was work to do in Winter. Living in Canada, he had to learn to shovel snow to keep his driveway clear. At first he resented the physical labour, but as he became used to it, he found this simple task invigorating and affirming...

So too, Winter of the soul imposes some work on us.

- 1 Prayer: Although it doesn't come easily we find that prayer becomes a lifeline. These are not eloquent wordy prayers, but often the desperate prayers of groaning and longing. *Winter grows pure faith. [Winter] grows almost nothing, but it grows biblical faith like no other season can... Think about this: when you want someone to pray for you, you instinctively seek someone who's endured at least one long, hard, dark winter... (It's during this season, more than any other, that using a journal to write our prayers in can be valuable.)*
- 2 Pruning: In winter we prune the fruit trees so that there will be new and abundant growth in Spring and Summer. This is counter-intuitive because pruning in winter makes dead things look even dead, but it's the time to maximise the growth of the core of the plant. When in Winter prune hard. Prune your activities and commitments right down to the bare essentials. Slow down, sleep more, focus on essential disciplines. This strengthens our core. Most of us have full calendars and full commitment quotas. This spreads our energies. When we prune we come into spring lean and strong. It's not irresponsibly bailing but it is relentlessly pursuing simplicity.
- 3 Waiting: Waiting forces our faith to grow. During this waiting God seems distant, our prayers are answered with silence and it seems as though nothing makes sense. But we discover that we are like the two on the road to Emmaus. We're struggling, we're trudging, but we are not alone. Jesus is walking with us and He will warm our hearts and we'll see it when we look back. *"My guess is that waiting builds faith's backbone. The waiting is necessary to cultivate a faith to die for and live for, a faith that will literally change the world. Waiting is necessary for faith in the same way a chrysalis is necessary for a caterpillar, to change it from a grub that crawls the earth to a butterfly..."*

Mark's wife, Cheryl, was Carol's closest friend and caregiver. Cheryl set a lot of time aside to pray, pruned her calendar to focus on Carol and accepted that she would wait through the uncertainties of the illness and the death of her closest friend. *"Cheryl's faith today is leaner and tougher and less prone to doubts and setbacks. It's more a faith that is certain of things hoped for, assured of things unseen. It's more based on who God is, not her circumstance of the moment."*

Questions for Discussion.

3. Going back to the Elijah passage, examine the role of prayer, pruning and waiting in Elijah's experience...
4. Discuss the three aspects of winter's work. How do we experience this? Where do you think we need to work more?

What are Winter's Gifts?

- 1 A new you: Winter gives us the opportunity to re-imagine our lives. We re-think our priorities, we weed out non-essentials, we emerge from winter with new strength and courage.
- 2 A new perspective: *"Maybe the greatest gift of winter, a gift that winter alone gives, is that it makes us heavenly minded. It breaks our addiction to this-worldliness and nurtures us in an anticipation of things unseen."* While we are waiting for spring we are also learning to long for heaven.
- 3 A possibility to play: Mark talks about his love of skiing which can only be done in winter. So too, in the winter of the soul, there can be opportunities, in our pruned lives, to play. Sleep more, read more, rush less, value time with special family and friends.

So, how do we survive Winter?

- 1 Understand the season: Slow down, embrace what is happening, recognise that you haven't done anything wrong, that winter is not failure but the time that we can strengthen the core.
- 2 Remember that Jesus is with us: Think of the road to Emmaus or Jesus on the boat in the storm with His disciples. We often think He isn't there, but He is...

Questions for Discussion.

5. How is God lovingly present to Elijah in his winter?
6. Take turns to share the insights you have gained about winter.

Closure.

Take some time to close in silent prayer. Take time to thank God for His work in winter and pray for yourself or anyone else you know who might be in a winter right now.

Study 4: Autumn³



Recapping Summer

But summer just wants to give and give. Its only demand is that we surrender to it, bask in it... Spiritual insight hangs plump from low branches. It's easy to nourish ourselves, warm ourselves, refresh ourselves... Most people experience a summertime of the heart right after conversion...

<u>Summer's Symptoms and Gifts</u>	<u>Summer's Work</u>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Abundance: Light, warmth, water, growth, holidays and joy. 2. A turn-around of winter. 3. Flow and Fruitfulness. 4. God is feels close, clear and real. 5. Can come after an upheaval. 6. A taste of the KINGdom. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Enjoy and Grow Strong. 2. Rhythm: Unhurried, Un-anxious, and Fruitful. 3. Giving First-fruits to God.
	<u>Summer's Dangers</u>
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Nostalgia – Stuck in the past. 2. Consumerism – Can't get enough. 3. Dehydration – forget to refill. 4. Leafiness – more leaves than fruit.

So what is Autumn like?

If one looks at it in the context of an agricultural community in a region where the winter is long and harsh, then Autumn has the following aspects to consider:

1. Autumn is about **harvest**. (And this is often a community experience.) It's about *reaping* what has been *sown* and *storing* what we reap. This is a double-edged sword because if we sow well, we can have *expectant hearts* that we will reap and store well. If we have not sown or if we have sown bad seed, then expectation becomes dread as we realise we will harvest and store either nothing or weeds.

When times of harvest come along, they teach us to consider what we are sowing. Mark tells the story of Charlie who, although he is handsome, charming and witty, has a major anger management problem. Charlie has harvested two failed marriages, a couple of job dismissals and estranged kids, but he isn't changing the seed he is *sowing* and so he *harvests* and *stores* the same old pain.

2. Autumn is about **feasting and thanksgiving**. Mark writes about the agricultural backdrop of the American and Canadian traditions of Thanksgiving: *Harvest was an occasion for thanksgiving, a time to*

³ While Mark focuses on certain aspects of Autumn and the story of Gideon, this chapter will deal with Autumn more generally.

recounts the sad story in Ezra 3 where the temple is being rebuilt and, as the foundations are being laid, people are cheering but the older people are weeping because the temple is not as great as it once was.

2. **Consumerism** – In Summer we can become sucked into picky consumerism where *we crave many things and enjoy none*.

3. **Dehydration** – It's also possible to dehydrate in summer. It's hard to imagine this, but in the midst of all the idyllic warmth of summer and all that grows around us, drought can catch us by surprise. How easily our gardens dry out on a typical summer's day and we must water them. So too our souls. In the seed and sower parable Jesus warned about the seeds that got too much warmth and light: *"When the sun came up, the plants were scorched."* Mark tells the story about a man he met who *said he rarely reads the Bible anymore. He feels that God has given him a lifetime of insight into His Word, and now the task is simply to live it...*

4. **Leafiness**: Don't mistake leafiness for fruitfulness. Mark has a lovely vine that he has growing in his arbor. Its grapes are sour because he doesn't cut back the leaves enough. The leaves give nice shade and are the product of a bountiful summer, but a good vintner knows to pinch off some leaves while they are small so that the grapes will see the sun and grow sweet. *In similar fashion, the summer of the heart can lure us into saying yes to so much that activity overtakes productivity. Most spiritually oversubscribed people I know go that way in high summer... Lots of leaves, little fruit...*

A gardener, with the flick of a wrist or a pinch of the fingers, can nip in the bud or pluck the head of something that, if it's left to grow too long can be removed only with a chainsaw or backhoe... That flick of the wrist or pinch of the fingers (to take off some leaves) is the simple word no.

Questions for Discussion.

7. What form would nostalgia have taken in Joseph's life?
8. How do we know that Joseph wasn't caught up in consumerism?
9. Discuss the argument of the man who doesn't read his Bible anymore.
10. How might the simplicity of Joseph's later imprisonment have prepared him for the summer of being second-in-command in Egypt?
11. In groups of 3 share which danger you identify with most.

Conclusion: Summer's Caveat.

Mark notes that summer is often preceded by chaos and trouble. He looks at Jesus' end-time prophecies where the Kingdom arrives like summer on the heels of chaos and trouble (Mark 13²⁸⁻²⁹) and reminds us that summer often arrives after upheaval.

Pray for wisdom and courage to hold on for summer and then to live it.

Study 2: Spring.



Recapping Winter.

When I plunged into winter, one sign of that was I could hardly wake up, and I ached most of the time. People had to repeat things to me, because I wasn't listening as carefully as I should. I often had to repeat things to others because I wasn't speaking as clearly as I might. I failed to notice much. I dragged myself around. I was half deaf, almost blind, borderline lame.

<u>Winter's Symptoms</u>	<u>Winter's Work</u>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Feeling God is absent (He is not) 2. Feeling alone (You are not) 3. Sense of death/uselessness 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Prayer (and Faith) 2. Pruning (Simplifying) 3. Waiting (Caterpillar to Butterfly)
<u>Winter's Gifts</u>	<u>Winter's Dangers</u>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A new me (Dark rings) 2. New perspective (Heavenly minded) 3. Playful simplicity 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Feeling guilty – blaming self 2. Withdrawing – from God & people 3. Falling into real depression.

So what is Spring like?

What does springtime of the heart feel like? It pulses with joy... Spring is a raucous fanfare of jubilation. It's the time to plant things. It's a time when our surroundings are impacted by what is happening in us.

These seasons [of Spring] are always marked by repentance, but they are also characterized by joy and peace. We have a fresh hunger for prayer, preaching, worship, service, evangelism, and friendship. We work hard and celebrate often. Our joy is obvious and infectious, our peace deep and inviting... We tend gardens, walk the woods, play in the parks. We pick up litter we didn't leave. We notice birds, trees, clouds, frogs...

The overflow of our reignited love for God is our reawakened love for creation and people. It's **renewal** – *spiritual, emotional, physical and moral*. It emerges suddenly and defiantly out of dryness and barrenness and the only explanation is that God did it. God acted. God intervened. *Aslan is on the move*².

Spring offers **vindication** – the promise of the defeat of our enemies, the restoration of our confidence and the healing of our wounds. The risks

² Aslan is the Christ character in CS Lewis' Narnia Chronicles. In "The Lion, the witch and the wardrobe" the four Pevensie children enter Narnia, which has been in perpetual winter, but there are hints of spring and the rumour is rife: "Aslan is on the move."

we take pan out. The seeds we sowed with tears we reap with joy. *Jesus reserves his deepest intimacy for winter. But He displays his greatest handiwork in spring. He brings living water into thirsty lands, emotional strength to faltering hearts, physical wellness to the sick and the lame.*

The desert road becomes a **highway**: *It's like the goat path of obedience becomes an autobahn. A road that used to be hard and lonely and long is now quick and easy and almost always traveled in company.*

Spring is **homecoming**. It's discovering where we belong.

We're going to look at the story of Jesus healing the man born blind. It's a healing that takes place on the Sabbath and so the "religious mafia" tackle this man hard in an attempt to incriminate Jesus. Watch how spring arrives in this man's life:

As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth.² His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

³ "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.⁴ As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work.⁵ While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

⁶ Having said this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes.⁷ "Go," he told him, "wash in the Pool of Siloam" (this word means Sent). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing.

⁸ His neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, "Isn't this the same man who used to sit and beg?"

⁹ Some claimed that he was.

Others said, "No, he only looks like him."

But he himself insisted, "I am the man."

¹⁰ "How then were your eyes opened?" they demanded.

¹¹ He replied, "The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and washed, and then I could see."

¹² "Where is this man?" they asked him.

"I don't know," he said.

¹³ They brought to the Pharisees the man who had been blind. ¹⁴ Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man's eyes was a Sabbath. ¹⁵ Therefore the Pharisees also asked him how he had received his sight. "He put mud on my eyes," the man replied, "and I washed, and now I see."

¹⁶ Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath."

have to hoard or feel guilty for but which we can share. *"Don't trust in your wealth, which is so uncertain, but trust in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment."* (1Tim.6:17)

2. There are also **three rhythms** to master:

Summer (or Kingdom living) is unhurried. *In our busyness, we often miss God: the whirlwind of our doing becomes a smokescreen for evasion. Endless busyness is earwax against God's voice and a blind-fold to God's presence. God grows mute in the din of our shouting, remote in the blur of our rushing. But stillness reawakens our wonder and attention...* Have you ever been on a holiday where you have been so busy that you have come back more exhausted than when you left? This is a wasted summer. The story of Mary and Martha is a good illustration. This doesn't mean that we can't be *busy* – but we must be *unhurried*.

In summer we are not anxious. We must learn to enjoy God's bounty without guilt. Our protestant work ethic doesn't allow us to enjoy blessing – we feel guilt about getting things we didn't work for. We would do well to remember Jesus turning water into wine *so that the party could go on*. We can and must embrace *joy*.

Summertime is fruitful. There is abundant fruit that grows in our lives and we should treasure it and rejoice in it and instead of hoarding we should share. Generosity is the sign that we understand summer: it's all from God and not ours anyway.

3. **Gather firstfruits**. Autumn is the primary season of harvest. But Proverbs says "A wise youth harvests *in the summer*, but one who sleeps during harvest is a disgrace." (Prov.10:5) The first fruits are the first apples, the first ears of wheat, etc that come at the end of summer. In biblical thinking first-fruits belong to God. The first fruits were often considered the best. The bottom line of first fruits is that we give our very best to God and we give to Him first. It's about His honour and glory.

Questions to discuss.

4. Where is Joseph's contentment (enjoyment) of summer visible?
5. In what ways do we see the rhythms of summer (unhurried-ness, un-anxious-ness and fruitfulness) in Joseph's life?"
6. How does he offer first-fruits to God? In what ways did being a slave make this difficult? Look at Gen.40⁸ and Gen.41¹⁶ to get a further perspective.

The dangers of Summer.

1. **Nostalgia** – is where we idolise an idealised past summer. It's when we put physical and spiritual summers on pedestals and then nothing compares with them. Summer's beauty is a rumour of heaven that should have us looking *forward*, but nostalgia makes us look *backward*. Mark

understanding. He was tangibly growing fruit in my life. The world seemed light and bright and full of colour, and warm all the time.

Jacob had twelve sons and Joseph was his favourite. Jacob gave Joseph a special robe. Joseph bragged about dreams of his personal greatness. His eleven brothers despised him, faked his death and sold him to slave-traders. Genesis 39¹⁻¹⁰ tells the next part of Joseph's story... (Bear in mind that after Potiphar's wife incriminated him, he went into prison where he interpreted two dreams and then interpreted Pharaoh's dream, became Egypt's second-in-command and was finally reconciled with his family.)

¹ Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. Potiphar, an Egyptian who was one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him there.

² The LORD was with Joseph and he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master. ³ When his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD gave him success in everything he did, ⁴ Joseph found favor in his eyes and became his attendant. Potiphar put him in charge of his household, and he entrusted to his care everything he owned. ⁵ From the time he put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the LORD blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph. The blessing of the LORD was on everything Potiphar had, both in the house and in the field. ⁶ So he left in Joseph's care everything he had; with Joseph in charge, he did not concern himself with anything except the food he ate.

Now Joseph was well-built and handsome, ⁷ and after a while his master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, "Come to bed with me!"

⁸ But he refused. "With me in charge," he told her, "my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. ⁹ No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" ¹⁰ And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her.

Questions for Discussion.

1. Discuss the statement: "summertime's a taste of the kingdom?"
2. List the different ways in which Joseph experiences summer.
3. Why was Potiphar blessed? Do you think he realised it?

What is the Work of Summer?

1. First and foremost, summer is there for us to **enjoy**. Warm up, rest up, frolic, play, rest and **grow strong**. Rediscover the sheer pleasure of being alive. And recognise God as the source of this abundance that we don't

But others asked, "How can a sinner do such miraculous signs?" So they were divided.

¹⁷ Finally they turned again to the blind man, "What have you to say about him? It was your eyes he opened."

The man replied, "He is a prophet."

(The Pharisees quiz his parents but they are non committal.)

...²⁴ A second time they summoned the man who had been blind. "Give glory to God," they said. "We know this man is a sinner."

²⁵ He replied, "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!"

²⁶ Then they asked him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?"

²⁷ He answered, "I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples, too?"

²⁸ Then they hurled insults at him and said, "You are this fellow's disciple! We are disciples of Moses!" ²⁹ We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don't even know where he comes from."

³⁰ The man answered, "Now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. ³¹ We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does his will. ³² Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. ³³ If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."

³⁴ To this they replied, "You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!" And they threw him out.

³⁵ Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?"

³⁶ "Who is he, sir?" the man asked. "Tell me so that I may believe in him."

³⁷ Jesus said, "You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you."

³⁸ Then the man said, "Lord, I believe," and he worshiped him.

³⁹ Jesus said, "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind." (John 9:1-39)

Questions for Discussion.

1. The blind man experiences a significant spring. Identify the different moments of renewal, vindication, highway and homecoming.
2. What experiences of spiritual spring can you identify with?
3. What are the signs of "Aslan being on the move?" How does Jesus significantly intervene in the man's life?

The Work of Spring.

Spring is an amazing season of joy and optimism, but it also calls us to

some serious work. We need to harness the sense of joy and life that spring gives in order to tackle some really important work:

The first work of Spring is **plowing**. A season of spring/renewal is a gift, but without plowing, this gift can be wasted. Plowing is very hard work and it offers no immediate reward. Spiritual plowing starts with *listening*: digging deep and wrestling hard to receive the seed that will be planted in us (James1:21). Resolve to establish holy habits of scripture reading, prayer, spiritual fellowship and other disciplines that will bring you closer to God. These holy habits will take courage and perseverance to put in place, but they prepare the soil for what comes next.

Then comes **planting**. This is a time to establish some new things. It's the time to take some risks and try some new things. The vitality and optimism of Spring makes it the ideal time to do this, because the security of the season allows some freedom to try and fail. If we don't plant, there will not be a harvest. *But the season is right, and to not do something now, right now, would be to squander a wide-open opportunity, it would be to leave a field untended in the vain hope that it will be ready to harvest come fall.*

The final work of spring is **cleaning**. We're quite familiar with this as far as housekeeping goes – it's clearing, tidying, organising and discarding. When we do this spiritually, we are learning to pray the prayer of *examen*: At the end of each day we look back at our day looking for signs of clutter, junk and chaos and we deal with it. *Because the examen helps me understand my spiritual and emotional rhythms, it helps me live with greater focus and effectiveness. I can see the clutter to remove it. I distinguish the habitual from the purposeful, mere busyness from real productiveness. I separate actions that are fruitful from those that are fruitless, ways of thinking that are self-generating from those that are self-defeating and relationships that are life-giving from those that are life-sucking. And then I arrange the "workshop" so that I can operate out of strength and joy.*

Questions for Discussion

4. Are there signs of the *work* of Spring in the blind man's life?
5. "The greatest danger of spring is wasting it." Would you agree with this statement? Why or why not? How do we avoid wasting it?
6. Read John 5:1-15. In what ways does the lame man squander spring?
7. How would one implement plowing, planting and cleaning today?

Closure.

Spring is a wonderful and beautiful season. Take time to think of the abundance and luxuriousness of physical spring and thank God that He wants to do the same in our souls too.

Study 3: Summer.

Recapping Spring

I love this about Springtime most of all... I love the way God renews my spirit. The way the things inside me that have become dark and dank and musty are flooded with light, washed and rinsed and disinfected... I had lost the joy of my salvation, and I had a scab of cynicism on my wound. And then, suddenly and all at once it broke and God began to renew a right spirit in me. Cynicism gave way to hope and boldness. Self-pity was replaced with sound-mindedness. The joy of my salvation came back with a rush and I thirsted and hungered after righteousness.



<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Spring's Symptoms</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Renewal: New life in all areas 2. Vindication: Breakthrough 3. Highway: Hard things become easier 4. Homecoming: A sense of belonging 	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Spring's Work</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Plowing (hard, future focused) 2. Planting (take risks, try new things) 3. Cleaning (clear junk and clutter)
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Spring's Gifts</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Beauty: the "joy of our salvation" 2. High levels of energy & motivation 3. Opportunity for big forward steps 	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Spring's Dangers</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. We can sleep through it 2. Neglecting the work 3. Getting addicted to the bounty

So what is Summer like?

Mark describes an idyllic summer from his youth and then argues that Summer is the season that best portrays the Kingdom of God – especially in the eternal sense (heaven). *What do we associate with summer? Fruit, warmth, light, rest, play, wonder, festival, joy, reunion, holidays. All, Jesus implies, are kingdom experiences. The kingdom of heaven, Jesus told us in story upon story, is a banquet, a homecoming, a joyful reunion, a festival... In winter, God is like an enemy, friends become strangers and death and darkness sidle up close. But summer flips that: God and others draw intimately near, life and light surround us, and night and mourning flee away. Darkness seems a tacky rumour, death a feeble opponent. So summertime's a taste of the kingdom.*

How do you know you're in summer? Simply, things flow. Your life is marked by effortlessness. Fruit come easily. Joy rises naturally. Light shines everywhere. You have energy to spare... In that [summer] season I heard God crystal clear. I could almost see Him. Every conversation I had – with fellow-believers, with nonbelievers – was holy. Every Scripture was a revelation. God was... in my seeing, in my hearing, in my speaking and in my