

00:00

Introduction

Well, hello, and welcome to Ponder.

We're having a conversation about the word of the Lord, as it was preached to us on Sunday, and as we encounter it in our everyday lives. My name is Jack.

I'm here with Jono, Ben, and Tristan, and we're pondering this new series, Blessed to Be a Blessing. How are you guys going today?

Very well, thanks, man.

Yeah, very good morning.

Great.

0:27

Sermon recap

Awesome, awesome.

As I said, we're reflecting on Jono's sermon from last Sunday. Jono, do you want to give us a quick recap of what that was about?

Yeah, so we kicked off a new series, Blessed to Be a Blessing. It's our May mission month series.

And we were basically tracking from Genesis 12 through to Revelation very quickly, God's plan to bless and how that worked out through the Old Testament.

And then most fully in Jesus, his amazing life, which was an extraordinary blessing to the world and to the individuals he came in contact with.

And then we just sort of looked at Revelation and were reminded that it ends in the blessing of God being observed and the blessing of God being experienced in human flourishing.

And then we talked a bit, sort of a bit of a mixture message sermon, looking at the Bible and also looking at vision.

So we were trying to be inspired by the fact that the local church is really God's dream in Christ to change the world and impact the world. And we're raising money in a pledge giving offering.

And that's a good thing to give to because the church is God's idea.

Yeah, absolutely. I thought it was a very inspiring sermon in terms of making me want to, giving me a passion for the local church. We're going to talk a bit about the local church in this podcast today.

2:04

How can we misunderstand God's blessing?

But I guess to start, you started with a biblical basis and we'll do a real quick theological basis.

And we were chatting before the pod, Jono, about ways that we can misunderstand blessing, aberrant versions of blessing, where you speak and it will happen.

You want to talk a little bit about that and clarify, clarify what are bad ways to understand blessings before we jump in?

I think just in a general sense, the Word of Faith movement took the idea of blessing and prayer, I think, too far where you basically speak things into existence.

It's hard because there is something wonderful about the idea of blessing, speaking a different future. That's what God does. He's like a preferred future, a changed identity, something that's better.

He's speaking good over people's lives, and it ends in ultimately human flourishing, not without suffering, but human flourishing. Like everything, it can be taken in a slightly different way, like Jude with false teaching.

I think a lot of the work of the evil one, the counterfeit, is it makes man higher and God less. And so we have to be careful we don't try to become God-like, where we have this power to just name it and claim it.

Yeah, the three words that you hear people say is healthy, wealthy, happy, that God wants what's best for you, that you're healthy, wealthy and happy.

And those things may be more or less true, but you look at the life of Jesus, He died on a cross, He was not wealthy, and He still lived a flourishing life.

And so this idea of blessing is not connected with our world's definition of the good life, but with a specifically Jesus-centered vision of the good life, and that is to know God.

Jesus said, blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven in the Beatitudes. So it's blessing according to God's definition, not according to the healthy, wealthy, happy definition.

And that's called the Prosperity Gospel, where it's like, you know, give and God will bless you to the hundredfold blessing, and He wants us to be wealthy. We don't teach that at this church, as Ben just said.

You could end up being poor, but we're talking about being part of passing on God's blessing by sharing the gospel with others.

Do we think less long-term than we used to?

So thinking about blessing, you talked about blessing as this idea of a man planting a fruit tree, thinking forward to his children or his grandchildren who get to enjoy that blessing.

I want to ask you guys, do you think, especially now in our day and age of sort of shortened retention spans and social media, are we less forward thinking than we used to be?

Yeah, the notion of planting a fruit tree that you will never get to experience the fruit of, or the shade of, I think in our generation is wild. Why would you do that?

As you said, we have shorter retention spans, we're kind of the microwave generation, instant food, high-speed internet, like if I want it, I want it now, because I don't know what I'm going to want in five minutes.

And so this idea that God, His Plan of Blessing spans a thousand generations is so beyond what any of us could comprehend.

And it's also testament to, like, what's the world's values? It's all about us. It's all about me, me, me.

It's all us-centered. And I feel like we offering that counterculture, well, not offering, that is our counterculture. We live lives that aren't surrounded by ourselves.

We are in community. It's a togetherness and that common denominator is Christ.

Yeah, time is a good understanding of the place of time. And life is essential for discipleship, isn't it? Things just take time.

And it is, like you say, it's a curse. It sounds awful, but it is. It's a bit of a curse to be living in a time where most things don't take that long.

And yeah, we just get used to it. I'm trying to lose a bit of weight. And I'm just reminded, you just can't do it really quickly.

It's like God designed us that all these things, they just take time. You can't get to know someone in deep friendship without time. And normally it involves some sort of challenge, cost, some arduous experience that builds a friendship.

It's interesting that Jesus constantly used agricultural metaphors.

Yeah. He's of course living in an agrarian society, but he was constantly talking about mustard trees and seeds and fruit and crops and wheat. These are very slow growing things.

He didn't tend to use metaphors of instant transformation because that's the kind of work of the kingdom. It's this mustard seed that though it's the smallest of all the seeds, grows and becomes a large tree.

The story of the Bible is so in line with this, isn't it? The promises of blessing that God makes, they take a really long time. We're talking hundreds of years.

It's just beyond our comprehension. It's almost like it doesn't feel like the person is telling the truth. So what do you mean it's going to take 40 years or 400 years?

You can't be telling the truth. No, no, he is telling the truth. It's just a long game.

It's a really long game. And when you think about it, that is the essence of faith. We can't please God without faith.

And to please Him, you've got to live life. You've got to play the long game. And keep believing, and keep believing, and keep believing.

It's cool to think of the fact that this church has been on this corner for 120 years.

And you think of all the dreams that that first generation had for what this church would be and what they would do. In a sense, I don't know what their dreams were, but we are the answer to their prayers now.

Yeah.

That God has been doing a very slow, long work in building a faithful church on this corner. And now we pray for the next generation that one day we'll fill those shoes, because God is doing this long and slow work.

And God cares about, it would seem, cares about local churches. Like the Revelation, there are letters written to unique churches. And sometimes they're not that big.

I've read that the church that Romans was sent to was a church of about 60 people. I don't know if that's true, but that's extraordinary. God thinks that small expressions of body life, of Christianity, matter.

9:22

How have we been blessed by previous generations?

And they have stories.

Yeah, coming back to the point you were talking about, Ben, about this church being here for over 100 years now, us being the fulfilment of their dreams, I wonder if we could reflect a little bit on the ways, specifically, that we've been blessed by

those who've come before us. When you sort of think about the things we get to enjoy and we've been blessed by now, what are some of the things that you think the previous generation has set up for us?

The biggest thing has to be this building. I'm pretty sure it was 20 years from the seed of the idea in 1999 or something to finally arriving in 2019.

So we have been so blessed, this generation, to inherit this ministry centre that we get to meet in every week, run youth group and young adults at church and worship and everything.

That is a very long project that a lot of people have worked on, that we get to live in the fruit of their dreams. To me, that's material. It's not like a spiritual lovely thing, but it's an enormous blessing for us.

It might sound a bit random, but there is a missionary couple that we've supported for many, many decades at this church and they've just finished up and come home for good.

But they were telling me the other day, when they visited, this church paid for the schooling of their three young kids 30 years ago.

And just things like that, that couple were able to stay on the mission field, able to have their kids educated in Papua New Guinea, and then ended up going to South Sudan and doing the most incredible work there. That's just one couple.

But we, as a church, were able to bless them and invest in them and, in a way, plant, plant some fruit trees that are now bearing fruit and shade and being a conduit of the love of God.

As a gospel outpost in Papua New Guinea and now in South Sudan, it's incredible what we get to be part of. As you say, practically speaking, the building is a big part, but so much mission giving over those decades.

I think, for me, being one of the later additions at this table for sure, having a real sense that a community that welcomes more community, a community that's so strong in their one church values and their spiritual values, that they really obey

that command of go forth and make disciples really well. And I think that's a massive part of the local church, where it's unfortunate that you see sometimes churches are so clicky and so localized.

But when I came here, it was so quick and so smooth because of that welcoming setup that they've had before.

And even when you asked in the sermon, who joined since 2019 and all those hands went up, and who got baptized, came to faith, that's such a true testament to the foundations that were set before, and now it's bearing fruit.

And you could also think, I thought some things similar to what you were thinking.

I was thinking about how many of our young adults are involved in volunteering in the church and worship, and creating that culture, and they're the product of their parents being faithful to God and raising them in that sense, and people who come to

this church and make friends with them get to receive that blessing as well through relationship.
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13:11

How has Church changed in recent years?

The local church has been a bit of a theme through the sermon and throughout discussions so far. And Jono, you showed that slide in the sermon of the different eras.

Always ready.

Yeah, always ready. You've been in ministry for, was it, 30 years now, thereabouts. How has the local church, as an idea, and in your experience, had to adapt and change over your lifetime that you've seen?

I think the biggest impact has been a noticeable cynicism from society towards the church.

When I grew up in the 70s, it was like if you saw a list of respected professions, a pastor, a local church pastor would be up there in the top five to 10, easy, probably top five. What's the top three oldest professions?

Clergy, Prostitution, and Lawyer or something. It's something like that. Yeah, it's just there's been a growing cynicism.

That's the biggest thing I've noticed with post-modernity really kicking in in the 80s and 90s. Is that right? Something like that.

Yeah, that would be the main thing. The digital era, that's been an enormous thing to have to deal with. There's also a bit before my time in ministry, which was early 90s, the charismatic renewal was a big deal.

And there's been lots you can talk about that probably gets us off track, but Bill Hybels and management theory and church growth, seeker services, there's been just lots of, maybe you call them fads that have come and gone.

But yeah, I would say the biggest thing is that cynicism. We have an uphill battle.

Yeah, interesting. How do you think the local church has or can adapt to that rising cynicism?

What I have found is the best thing you can do for cynicism is be authentic. Just be genuine. That wins over the postmodern mind.

It's like, I'm cynical of your showmanship or the facade, but if you own the dark stuff, own the failures, people love that.

15:48

What is Church like in other cultures?

That's what we've noticed over the years.

I'm interested, Tristan, you're an interesting resource to have on the podcast because obviously you've had experience in churches in a different context in South Africa.

I wonder if you had any reflections on what the role of the church was in South Africa and how similar or different is it to us here? What were the challenges? What have you noticed in that context versus this one?

I think the biggest thing or biggest notable thing that I've noticed is that in South Africa there's a real stronghold on getting to grips with traditional values first, and it's pushing those traditional values and it doesn't even have to be

biblical values. It can be like, you won't do this, you won't do this, you only sing hymns, you must obey your elders before anything else.

Whereas here, I'm not saying they don't have that here, I'm saying there's not such a tight hold on it, and that reflects later on where you do get just kids acting up and it's normal, and where something I've had to adjust is, oh, they don't have

that same level of respect that I do for something. So I think the biggest difference that I've noticed is just, it might be a cultural difference where it's so traditional in what I grew up in, and here it's more loose, I guess.

And so how does the ministry of the local church fit into that in both contexts?

I think it provides a beautiful balance between the two, where it's not we Bible bashing you when you do the wrong thing. It's we show grace. And we can have a conversation about this.

A younger person can have an opinion on the Bible and it's still so valid, whereas it's the other side where it's, you're not old enough yet to say something on this, or you're too young to understand your faith.

Whereas, I think the gospel provides such a clarity on both sides of the argument, where it just meets you in the middle. And there's really no hiding whether your faith is being shown outwardly.

Another thing to build upon is the emphasis of your younger ministries, because that's your base. Sunday school is your base, kids' ministries are your base. Then you go into youth, and then you're into the church.

And those are your building blocks, so to speak. And once you have a strong base there, it really sets you up for the next generation coming afterwards. Because, like we spoke about marriage and relationships recently with the young adults.

And that gift of singleness is so powerful because you serve. Like you need to have that desire to give to the kingdom, be kingdom minded. Yes, I think that's very important.

Yeah, absolutely.

Kids, youth ministry, get on it. Please.

19:15

What are the biggest challenges for emerging generations in the Church?

You'll be investing in planting for the next generation.

Ben, what do you think are the most sort of pressing challenges, especially for young adults and youth who are starting to think about their place in the world, who are starting to sort of inherit this church?

What are the challenges for them and how can we start to build, look to the future in terms of how we build up for those who come after us?

I think the biggest challenge is the fact that the world is not neutral. You know, we talk about the idea of spiritual formation, and we could be tempted to think that formation is a Christian thing, but formation is a human thing.

All people are being formed at all times by the context that they live in.

And so we, of all generations, but in a particularly potent way, the younger generation is being formed by the world, by the phone in our pocket, by this culture that we live in.

And it's being formed in an attitude of, we talked about cynicism, but opposition to God and the things of God.

And so as kind of the next generation, my generation become adults and take on positions of leadership and influence in the church, we need this reformation in the things of God to counter the deformation that we've had in the world.

And so, I think that's why next generation ministry is crucial of teaching the Bible's perspective on gender, marriage and sexuality, on work and vocation, on all these key things. Because what we're talking about is world view.

And we're born into the world and inherit its world view. But the world view of God and the Bible of Jesus himself has to be taught and has to become the lens through which we see the world. And that's a process which takes time and effort.

The loss of belief in absolute truth is huge, I reckon.

As it's been called, the disappearance of moral knowledge, this agreement, whether you're Christian or not, of that bunch of truths are accepted as being real. When you deconstruct, there's a lot of danger.

I think that's one of the hard parts about this next generation coming through of younger adults. It's just not knowing what you can believe, what you can trust, what institutions you can trust. Like marriage, like Ben just said, gender.

So many things are just up for grabs. That's not all wrong. Like it's great to ask a lot of the questions being asked, but it's an anxious time, henceforth with why the new generations are quite anxious.

22:08

What is the vision of our church?

So moving on to a slightly more hopeful note, you described vision as a picture of a preferred future that produces passion.

As we're thinking as a church about pushing forward and building vision, what do you see as that preferred future for us? Sort of what does that vision look like?

It's what we've been talking about at our church throughout the year, that it starts with a genuine understanding of the love of God, which we call the One.

It's His initiative, it's His character, it's His being, His triune being, He's in community, a community of love already. And as we are loved by Him and we experience love, we are enabled through the Gospel to love Him back. And that's the vision.

The vision is to experience the love of God so that we could love God, love others and make disciples, and be a faithful and fruitful church over the long term, the long game.

And we talk about 12 values that break down loving God, loving others and making disciples at our church. And I think that's helpful to get into the micro a bit of it. And this year we've been talking about the readiness aspect, always ready.

Because God loves us, we're called to love God, love others and make disciples. We talk about a commitment to holiness that we would see Christ, ready to see Christ, ready to serve Christ, share Christ, steward Christ.

I know that sounds general, but what I've learned over the years is that picture is what needs to be heralded. And I haven't talked so much about the Lord Jesus Christ, but He's the one that is the champion of it all.

So when we understand the love of God as the first port of call, the love of God is most fully expressed in Jesus. So when we get to, how do I experience the love of God? I'm completely directly drawn to the Gospel and the person of Christ.

So that's the preferred picture. When I was really young, first a pastor in about 94 or 95, this doctor came to our church with his family, and he was a bit of a nerdy guy, but he really loved the Lord.

And he said, when he left America, which he did a doctoral studies over there, and came here and he'd become a Christian not long before it, and he asked his pastor, what sort of church should I be looking for?

And he said the classic Keith Green line, look for a church where the pastor is bananas for Jesus. And I think that is the vision, that we're bananas for Jesus, that we just really love Jesus and are on about His kingdom.

And that's the preferred picture, because there's a heap of other things you can be bananas for.

I love that idea of a, you said in the sermon, normal church ministry. We're not trying to reinvent the wheel, but we believe that there should be a church on this corner.

There has been a church here for 120 years, and we want a church here for another 120 years. And so we're wrestling with what it means for our generation to be faithful today and to hopefully bear fruit for God's glory.

Ross Clifford at Bible College used to say, the preacher has to be standing there with the morning's newspaper in one hand and the Bible in the other, and be speaking to the issues of the day.

And though that is exactly what we've been talking about, to engage in the societal expression, iteration of the generation, what the society is doing. I also think you don't need a newspaper.

I also think you can just teach the truth of the New Testament and the whole Bible, but teach what Jesus says about the kingdom of God, and it will be absolutely relevant no matter what's going on in the newspaper.

And I think that's just a good thing to remember. It's so normal. You know what I mean?

And that's what we lose. We just lose that over time, a confidence that the Bible, the Sermon on the Mount, the teachings of Jesus, all the good stuff, it's worth holding on to because it's been entrusted to us. And we've got to fight the good fight.

And I love that concept because we live in a world that is like, we don't have enough time, it's always a time game, we always try and combat that time with our time, yet we have something that's timeless.

And that is just so, like what you said, it's compelling to, like you wouldn't want, you wouldn't not want to fight that fight, which is encouraging.

Yeah, back to that image of the always ready across the decades of the 20th century.

The church has looked different, different hymns and different styles, but the gospel is the line that runs through all of it, and then 20 times longer back into the past.

For 2,000 years, that has been the unchanging truth, as the world has, the world around it has changed.

Amen.

And the things we struggle with, that the blessing of God is countering. So this whole sermon that we're unpacking the thoughts of, it's about God's plan to bless. Like, it's His heart to bless.

And that means we're reflecting on being a people who know what it is to experience the blessing of God. It's a light-filled blessing, it's a love-filled blessing, it's a joy-filled blessing, all the fruits of the Spirit.

And the problems we come up against, they're just not new. The devil is a counterfeiter, and he doesn't come up with anything new. He's never come up with anything new in his life, in his existence.

He just counterfeits stuff. So, the counterfeits of money, sex and power are pretty much just really the issues that we deal with.

So, this whole discussion is about experiencing the favour of God and the blessing of God, and then learning to live in that light-filled environment by His truths, what He has taught us, how to live, and then, out of that blessed state, fighting the

Yeah, that's so awesome, and we have been so blessed in this church, and by God.

29:08

What is a church you have been blessed by?

Actually, and that leads me to our fun question for the week, not including Northern Life. What is a church that you have been blessed by in some way in your life?

I think it's easy for me to answer. I think it's the church that I was baptised in, my uncle's church in South Africa. Yeah, I grew up in that environment, in that community.

I've been really impacted by Life Church in America, Craig Groeschel's church.

In the early 90s, there were sermons available from different churches, and you could buy them. John Piper was one from Bethlehem Baptist, and they all cost money, and Rick Warren, and so you'd buy a series and you learn from the greats.

This guy that was a little bit older than me, a couple of years older, he started a church, Craig Groeschel, in the mid-90s. And they started out by saying, we're going to give everything away. Doesn't matter what it is.

And others weren't doing that. He took that idea, and they were very innovative, and they became the biggest church in America, and one of the biggest churches in the world. And they've never charged for anything.

They just give everything away. We've used their internet platform for online church. So, yeah, the generosity of Life Church has been incredibly inspiring for me.

I've learned a lot from Bridgetown Church in Portland, in the United States.

That was John Mark Comer plan to that church. They have a real focus on formation, very Dallas, Willardian. So, I certainly church that I've been immensely blessed by over the years.

What about you, Jack?

Yeah, well, I was thinking Bridgetown also, but then I was also thinking a little more locally, a French's Forest Baptist Church, which I've been to one of their services.

But they were really instrumental in creating an organisation that's dear to my heart, which is Baptist World Aid.

Also, there was a certain generation of people who went to French's Forest who sort of spread out throughout the church community here in Sydney and New South Wales. Jono, you were one of them, and I've gotten to know quite a few of those people.

That church at that era was an incubator for an organisation that I love, for a lot of people that I've gotten to know and who fed into my life. So kind of indirectly that church, the seeds that were planted in that church have gone on to bless many.

Well, that concludes our Ponder podcast for this week. Thank you for listening. Thank you guys for joining and we'll see you next week.