

A new season

Welcome to Seeds of Prayer for Spring 2024. Seeds will now be issued seasonally (ie four times per year) in this new, longer format. We shall also post more background content on the Hope Countryside website (bit.ly/hftc). This issue also includes a brief report (last item) on our recent in-person gathering in N Yorkshire.

A festive season

Spring is a time of festivals: Holy Week and Easter (24-31 March), Passover (22-30 April), Ascension (9 April), Pentecost (19 April). These feasts remind us of Jesus' first coming, of His passion and resurrection and the sending of the Holy Spirit on His people. But spring, with its joyful new life bursting out all around, is also a foretaste of the future Messianic kingdom. Spring flowers and spring rains appear several times in OT prophecy as images of the 'restoration', of the age to come (see bit.ly/mwsvh). Give thanks for these reminders of the Lord's yearly provision for our needs, of His death and resurrection that saves us from sin and death, and of the 'blessed hope' of our own resurrection and the age to come.

The fruitful field

*Laughs with abundance, and the land once lean,
Or fertile only in its own disgrace,
Exults to see its thistly curse repealed.
The various seasons woven into one,
And that one season an eternal spring.
(From: William Cowper, The Task, Book 6)*

The land mourns. Farmers are dismayed.

This year there has been an unfortunate coincidence of weather and politics affecting farming. The wettest winter in 130 years has prevented much autumn sowing and many crops already sown have been decimated by waterlogging and flooding. At the same time, the financial support that came through the Basic Payment System is being phased out. Farmers (in England) are being offered the new Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI), which grant-aids conservation projects and nature-friendly farming, but does nothing for food production. So far the take-up of SFI has been slow, probably due to the complexity of the scheme and the concomitant change of mindset. So the pressure is on, and the unrest and protests by farmers across Europe are already reaching our own nations. Pray for a turning to the Lord in our time of need, and that those involved in agriculture would acknowledge our Creator, leaning on Him more than on our own understanding.

The tenanted farming sector has suffered growing pressure. There are cases of avarice and oppression by agents and landlords. Depression, accidents and suicides remain common. But there is some good news arising from the 'Rock Review' (bit.ly/rcrv). Many of its recommendations have been taken up by government, including the right of a tenant to pursue non-permanent changes to land use (eg as offered by the SFI) without the landlord's permission. Pray for those involved, particularly George Dunn and team at the Tenant Farmers Association. As we pray, let us acknowledge that, 'our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.' ([Psalm 24:8](#)), and rejoice in the privilege of being custodians of His creation.

Forthcoming events

Saturday 13 April

9.00 - 10.30 PM

Signs of the times, signs of hope

Further exploration of the themes here, through presentations and prayer.

<https://web.zoom.us/join>

Zoom meeting ID: 821 1671 9194

Passcode: 905289

Monday 22 April

1.00 - 2.30 PM

World Prayer Centre, Prayer Watch

Special focus on rural Britain.

Zoom meeting ID: 819 5187 5317

Passcode: jesuslives

Wednesday 29 May

7.30 - 9.00 PM

A movement of hope in rural Britain

Sharing stories of mission; encouraging and praying for one another.

<https://web.zoom.us/join>

Zoom meeting ID: 821 1671 9194

Passcode: 905289

Saturday 29 June

A day on the farm

You are invited to gather once again in person at Southfield Farm, Coleshill, Warwickshire for another day of prayer and worship, bible reflection and discussion, courtesy of hosts John and Betty Plumb. More details to follow.

For information about all these events:
<https://hopeforthecountryside.uk/events>

Hope Countryside is a partnership including Village Hope, Agricultural Christian Fellowship, the World Prayer Centre and others. 'Hope Countryside' expresses our growing vision of beacons of prayer lighting up across rural Britain, bringing hope both to the countryside and from the countryside to the whole of the nation. Our aim is to promote understanding of, and prayer for, rural life and communities, church and mission, and farming and the land.

The land mourns. The beasts of the field are taken away.

Many times the Lord warned His people that if they fell out of relationship with Him, the land in which they dwelt would become dysfunctional, as a provocation for them to turn to Him again in repentance and hope (eg [Deuteronomy 28:15-45](#); [2 Chronicles 7:13-14](#); [Hosea 4:1-3](#); [Haggai 1:3-11](#)). Over the last decades, there have been many animal and plant diseases impacting our land and livestock, eg Foot and Mouth Disease, Bird 'Flu, Dutch Elm Disease, Ash Dieback and Bovine TB. On the human front, Covid 19 was an even bigger wake-up call.

The land mourns! With a materialistic worldview, we may fail to take the spiritual dimension of creation into account in investigating diseases. Alistair Petrie of Partnership Ministries (bit.ly/pmhl) advises us to delve deeper. What is really going on? Has the land been defiled in some way that causes a lingering foothold for evil and lasting judgement from God? What should we do? Advice like this provokes us to pray and ask big questions about British agriculture (and our towns and communities). However, beyond the call to pray for repentance and healing, might these 'pestilences' also be part of the shaking with which God promises to visit the earth and wake people up for the return of Jesus in judgement and visible kingship ([Isaiah 13:13](#); [Joel 3:16](#); [Haggai 2:6-7](#); [Matthew 24:5-7](#); [Mark 13:25](#)). Are they intended to provoke us to prepare for that event, as well as to pray for the healing of our land in the here and now? *Pray for increased awareness and greater understanding of how the Lord may be getting our attention as church and nation through these things, and for wisdom for a righteous response.*

The land mourns. Signs in the heavens and distress on the earth.

Weather extremes have become the 'new norm', while 'climate change' and 'Net Zero' have become a 'new ethic', shaping both public policy and cultural values. Both are having a profound impact on farming and the land. Agriculture is believed to account for 11% of UK GHG emissions (and 22% globally); reducing emissions is one of the three main objectives of the SFI (above). Beef and lamb production are being blamed for about 7.5% of global greenhouse gas emissions, resulting in proposals to phase cattle and sheep out altogether (eg bit.ly/ukfaz). But farmland is also an important carbon sink. As environmental activists rose up in 'extinction rebellion', so many farmers across the world, facing shrinking margins, reduction of support, and expanding environment-driven regulations, are rising up in protest, fearing their own extinction.

The climate change narrative is complex, and calls for much wisdom and discernment; there are alternatives to the mainstream 'orthodoxy' (bit.ly/ccvhs). God calls us to take care of His earth, and acknowledge our failure to do so. But we are also called to understand the times, see things from His viewpoint (eg [Isaiah 24:4-6](#), [26:9b](#); [Hosea 4:1-3](#); [Haggai 1:5-6](#)) (bit.ly/gcndj), and, ultimately, recognise that the future of the earth does not depend on human effort, but on God's promised redemption and renewal ([Romans 8:19-22](#); [2 Peter 3:13](#)) (bit.ly/hespc). *In the face of complex and multiple agendas, pray for prophetic discernment of 'God's hidden counsel behind visible states of affairs' and clear directions for prayer and action in accordance with His will and His Kingdom. Pray for farmers and for all fearing existential crisis as new measures to control emissions kick in.*

Reasons for hope

In the face of disease, weather and the continuing struggles of so many across the nation, it would be easy to be overwhelmed and despair. But we are not to be fearful, but to be a people of hope in word and deed, ready to give an answer to all who ask us why ([1 Peter 3:14-16](#)), and to be willing to point people to the reason behind and remedy for these events (eg [Joel 2:14-17](#)). *Pray that as people face continuing adversity they will not despair, but rather turn or return to the Lord and that we may faithfully witness, responding to physical needs, and also pointing to salvation and eternal hope through the cross of Jesus.*

Jesus was fully aware that in following him his disciples "will have trouble" ([John 16:33](#)). He warned us to beware being too popular with the world ([Luke 6:26](#)). But He also promised He would be with us "even to the end of the age" ([Matthew 28:20](#)). Under discouragement, persecution, and frightening and evil times, the early believers were exhorted to hold fast to their faith, be wise, and encourage one another, meet together and 'spur one another on toward love and good deeds' ([Ephesians 5:15-17](#); [Hebrews 10:23-25](#)). *Thank God for the opportunities we have had to share stories of mission and the creativity expressed through them. Pray that we can continue to encourage one another in sharing the love of God and the gospel of salvation with those around us.*

A 'gathered storm' and 'fields white for the harvest'

October's *Seeds* warned of a 'gathering storm', and our need to discern and prepare. Meeting in Saltburn-by-the-Sea we heard, 'the storm has gathered'. It is upon us. 2024 is a pivotal year. The coming 'tsunami' can bring good or evil, depending on how we respond. It will provide opportunities to bring hope, or more darkness if people persist in pursuing rebellion against God making worse and worse choices ([Isaiah 60:1-3](#)).

But we went on to hear much good news. Stories of fruitful mission were shared: some in very local contexts, but across a wide range of groups and ages; others from those who networked across a whole county and beyond. Ministers, coming from towns and so new to rural areas, sometimes found it difficult to see the Lord at work. But with fresh spiritual eyes and changed hearts, it soon became apparent that there were many souls ready to flourish with good care, encouragement and discipleship and that many seeds had been sown, requiring nurturing ready for harvest ([Matthew 9:35-37](#)). *Praise the Lord for all His good works. Pray for more labourers in the harvest fields wherever they are and for a greater urgency, wisdom and discernment among all His people. Pray for the prophetic voice from the fields to be heard across the nation and in government.*