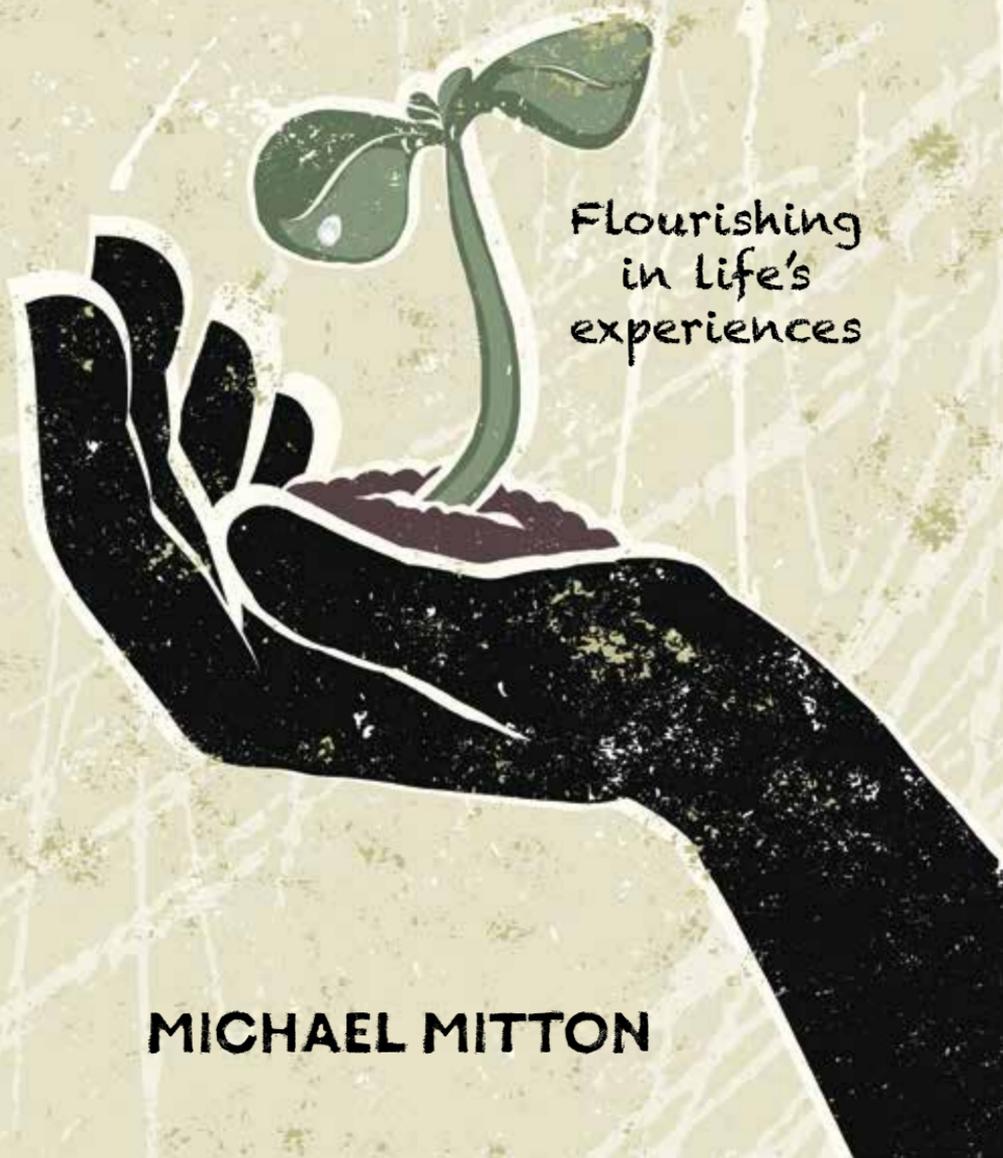


SEASONED BY SEASONS



Flourishing
in life's
experiences

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INTRODUCTION

Towards the end of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, the heroine of the play, Portia, is taking an evening walk with her waiting maid, Nerissa. They hear some music and notice its particular quality when heard in the night-time. Then Portia, whom we know by this stage of the play to be someone of impressive wisdom and insight, delivers one of her beautiful speeches:

*The crow doth sing as sweetly as the lark
When neither is attended; and, I think,
The nightingale, if she should sing by day,
When every goose is cackling, would be thought
No better a musician than the wren.
How many things by season season'd are
To their right praise and true perfection!¹*

Portia is noticing that things are at their best when in the right place and time. She says that there is something exquisite about the sound of a nightingale singing away in the dark hours of the night. But to hear it among the cacophony of cackling geese in broad daylight would make it much less special. Though some may fear the dark as inhospitable and full of threats, it is the night that is the welcome host for this beautiful songbird. Night and day, light and dark all have their purposes.

'For everything there is a season,'² says that engaging writer of the book of Ecclesiastes, who observes that life has to go through many different seasons, with each season having value and virtue. And Shakespeare, through Portia, ponders how many things in life are seasoned by the various seasons we find ourselves in. I don't know

enough about Shakespeare to know quite how he was using the word 'season' there. Was it to do with the seasoning of adding flavour? Or was it about the way we talk about wood being seasoned when it has been allowed to dry out and has become tough and resilient? In my experience, both are true when it comes to the passage of the soul that passes through many seasons. These seasons of life through which we journey can indeed act like seasoning – we pick up sprinklings of wisdom and insight and are all the richer for it. And there are many experiences of life that produce a hardiness that equips us well for the onward journey.

For those of us who live well clear of the equator, the seasons are well defined. In early Celtic Britain, they were marked out not so much by weather as by daylight. Thus, the first of May marked the first day of summer – the season of three months in the middle of which the sun was at its highest. The first of November marked the start of the winter trimester, during the middle of which the sun was at its lowest. In between these were the seasons of spring and autumn, and in the middle of those seasons fell the equinox, those two days of the year when the measures of light and dark are the same.

In many respects, the seasons through which our souls travel are very much influenced by light. In this case, not so much literal daylight (though many of us are influenced in our souls by the presence and absence of daylight), but more the kind of light that John's Gospel speaks about. Here was a writer who loved playing with the concept of light, and the work he so carefully crafted about the life and teaching of Jesus is full of references to a light that enlightens the soul. Listen to the first few words of his book where he introduces us to Jesus, whom at this stage of his book he calls 'the Word':

What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the

light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

JOHN 1:3-9

After such a blazing start to his Gospel, you might think all that follows will be high-summer daylight. But this is far from the case. Yes, there certainly are the bright days of glorious healings, miraculous feedings of thousands of people, the poor hearing great news and the abusive powers being challenged. But you also have Nicodemus coming by night³ because he is terrified by the thought of what his fellow religious leaders might think of him. When you read his story, you can see his furrowed brow and glancing eyes, and hear his searching questions and you can't help but feel the longings in the hidden recesses of his heart. And, of course, as you move on in this book, the shadows lengthen across the life of Jesus, so much so that one terrible afternoon the sun turns its face away from this earth, leaving deep darkness over the mount where the limp, lifeless body of Jesus hangs. But the story does not end there, because two days after these fearful events John gets going again with another dark and light story: 'Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark...'⁴ In this severe dark night of the soul, Mary Magdalene, one of the people who loved Jesus most, fumbles her way to the tomb, only to discover that a greater light than she ever could have imagined has broken into the world in the form of her radiant resurrected Messiah.

Such toing and froing of light and dark is so typical of our lives. I find it doesn't take much to send either light or dark across my path. I can be having a day full of brightness, but then one piece of bad news causes the sun to go in and the thunderclouds roll over to darken my land. Equally, I have also known times when I thought the path ahead looked fairly gloomy, only to find unexpected shafts of light leading me on, not only keeping me from stumbling, but enabling me to be delighted by surprise discoveries.

I find it so encouraging to thumb my way through my Bible and discover that it is full of very human stories of people who experienced just the same thing. I find in these ancient scriptures varying stories of spring, summer, autumn and winter. Whether it is in the stories themselves, or the reflections of the writer, I have found guides here to help me make the most of every season.

The chapters that follow will take us through the different seasons and I shall pick up some themes that seem particularly suited to each season. The allocations of subjects to seasons is not a precise science, so you might reckon, for example, that a reading set for winter might be better placed in autumn. You are free to do your own editing. This is a book that you can start at the beginning and work your way through, or you may prefer just to dip into a chapter or life experience that seems particularly relevant. Each reading will have a question for reflection and a prayer to help connect the Bible story with your story.

We have to recognise that, in our own journey of the soul, the seasons do not necessarily follow the order that we see in the outer world. In that world, spring always follows winter, and autumn always follows summer. But in the seasons of the soul, we can experience a beautiful springtime, but then a sudden loss can throw us into an autumn. One season may last several months, and another a few days. There is really no telling which season is coming next. But the Bible stories in this book tell us that we are given what we need to face whichever season comes our way.

Traditionally, the Bible has been a guidebook for Christians, but increasingly I am finding that people of no particular religious persuasion are intrigued by the stories and teachings of the Bible. They recognise that it never was designed for the exclusive use of religious people. Yes, there are parts (such as some of Paul's teaching in his letters) that are directed to church people to help them with specific churchy issues, but so much of the Bible is written to all people who are simply trying to make sense of this precious life

we have been given. The book of Proverbs, for example, is full of wisdom that is as relevant to our world today as it was to the world for which it was originally written. The great stories of Noah, Joseph, Ruth and Mary are still brimful of imaginative life and drama and succeed in fascinating us. All four of the Gospel stories were written for people outside the church to tell the world about the story of this carpenter's son from Nazareth who turned out to be much more than a carpenter's son.

Every story recorded in the Bible is inevitably only a small snapshot of the event that happened. We are meant to use our imaginations to bring it to life, and in the readings that follow I have recorded what I 'see' in these life events. Those familiar with Ignatian spirituality will know the value of using the gift of imagination. I hope what I have written will spark your imagination, to help you discover the treasures of each story. Hopefully, too, it will encourage you to do your own imaginative journey with these special stories.

It never ceases to amaze me how I can visit a passage of the Bible which I may have read countless times, and yet find in it a new discovery that becomes a source of deep life for me. How you explain this, I don't know. 'All Scripture is inspired by God,'⁵ wrote Paul to his friend Timothy, and it is certainly my experience that very often as I settle myself into a passage from the Bible, something about it comes alive and I become aware of the presence of God as I inhale it into my soul.

'How many things by season season'd are to their right praise and true perfection?' wonders Portia. This seasoning leads to praise and perfection. The 'praise', as I understand it, is that response of gratitude that comes from the discovery that life can thrive in any season. The 'perfection' I think is not so much to do with a goody-goody perfection, but rather in the sense of an artist seeking to perfect her craft – that intention to work at something until it becomes all that it can be. This is the gift of all seasons – each can work on our souls to enable us to become more than we ever

thought possible. May our exploration of these passages of ancient writing do just that.

And God said, 'Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.' And it was so.

GENESIS 1:14-15



AUTUMN

The season of
creating space

INTRODUCTION

In the early Celtic calendar, autumn began on 1 August, and they called this season *Lammas*, an Anglo-Saxon word derived from *hlaf-mas*, meaning ‘the mass loaf’. This was the day when you brought to church a loaf made from the fresh harvest of the new grain crop. During this season, most of the produce from the land would ripen and be harvested. Autumn is a season of fruitfulness, but also, as it progresses, it is a time where the long days of summer get noticeably shorter, the deciduous trees turn colour and release their leaves to the ground.

Shelley begins one of his odes with,

*I stood within the city disinterred
And heard the autumnal leaves, like light footfalls
of spirits passing through the streets⁶*

Autumn has that feeling of life being let go, as spirits are released from the body at death. There is a theme of dying in the autumn – much in nature appears to die off and lose the vigorous life of summer. The season of autumn ends with Halloween, the festival that traditionally heralds All Saints Day, the day of remembering those who have died. And yet, despite this theme of dying and loss, autumn can be one of the most beautiful and striking of the seasons, especially where such trees as maples and aspens flare up in rich golds and crimsons.

Autumn therefore is a curious mix of celebration and loss. The losses are considerable: the loss of warmth, rich foliage, colourful flowers, crop-filled fields and of course the light, which is rapidly retreating

by the time we get to the autumn equinox. But nature also tells us that all this letting go is for a reason. All the harvest produce is made up of what the earth has released for us. It is perhaps the deciduous trees that are most articulate about one of the great messages of autumn. Watch those fluttering leaves pile up beneath the great ashes, oaks, chestnuts and sycamores. Little by little, they change and become humus. That humus sinks down, and becomes the earth around those slender roots that sustains the tree for the next season of life.

In the Bible, we discover many stories to do with the great range of losses suffered by humankind. What I notice in them is that when people bring these experiences into a perspective of faith in God, they discover that the willingness to let go and grieve creates space for new possibilities. This kind of grieving creates space for new vision. They begin to see things in a new light. It was the prophet Isaiah who brought this message from God to a group of people who had experienced severe losses:

Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

ISAIAH 43:18–19⁷

The biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann wrote ‘only grief permits newness’.⁸ If he is right, then if we want springtime newness in our souls, we must learn to grieve well. The autumns that come our way nearly always involve some kind of grieving, and when this is well done then space is created for new possibilities.

FEAR – SPACE FOR NEW CONFIDENCE

On that day, when evening had come, [Jesus] said to [his disciples], ‘Let us go across to the other side.’ And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great gale arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, ‘Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?’ He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, ‘Peace! Be still!’ Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, ‘Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?’ And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, ‘Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?’

MARK 4:35–41 (see also MARK 1:14–20)

The story of Jesus asleep in the storm-tossed boat is well known. It has been trawled by many a preacher, who, in their sermons, release their catch of good points to their congregations who leave church knowing they must not be anxious or afraid, and must trust Jesus who calms every storm of life. And yet, when they get home, it will take only a phone call to dislodge the message of the sermon, and once again they are nervously grasping the side of a rocking boat wondering whether their God really will come to their rescue, or whether he might as well be a sleeping deity in the midst of a human storm.

To help me envisage this story, I find it easier to home in on one of the disciples, so I am going to think about how this event might have been for Andrew. He is Peter’s brother and we know he is a fisherman

and therefore he is familiar with this world of boats, lakes and storms. He is quite happy to launch out into the lake as night falls. In the old days, when he worked this lake for fish, he was often out in the hours of darkness. Perhaps, on this occasion, they are using his boat. So there he is back in his familiar world, shipping Jesus and his friends to the other side of the lake. But then it happens. He knows the signs – that familiar disturbance of air that will all too quickly become a squall, tossing the boat on the heaving lake. Heavy raindrops spatter into the wooden craft. His friends pull their thick robes over themselves for shelter. It is now so dark that it is hard to make out who's who on the boat. Andrew has steered his boat through many a storm before now, but this looks like being a mean one, and, as luck would have it, they are as far from shore as is possible on this great lake. But he is in charge of this boat, and he must get them to land as fast as he can.

Yet, try as he might, Andrew cannot get control of his boat, and he begins to realise that he is losing the battle against this storm. Peter is shouting something at him and others are screaming advice. In the storm-force wind, the raindrops feel sharp and fierce even on his rugged face. He has always been a strong and courageous man, but he feels such courage drain from him in the face of this gale.

He feels fear in his guts. And he has every right to be afraid; his life is in real danger. He passes a rope to Peter and struggles his way to the stern past the others, who are all shouting things now. Jesus has done some pretty impressive things in recent days; surely he can help? But when he gets to the stern of the boat, he is astonished to find Jesus curled up and fast asleep on the fishing nets! The boat is tossing around like an untamed donkey. Water is drenching Jesus, but even that doesn't wake him. Andrew clammers closer and grasps his arm. Ever since he had chosen to follow this Jesus of Nazareth, the world had become such a safe place for him. This rabbi demonstrated again and again how much he cared for people. Andrew was getting to the point where he really did believe that he truly was the Son of God, the Messiah for whom his people had

longed with such a desperate and deep yearning. But what use was it having the Son of God in your boat if all he could do was sleep when you really needed him? Surely you should not have to rouse God from his slumbers?

In desperation, Andrew shakes Jesus by the shoulders and screams at him to wake up. It's difficult to see his face in this thick darkness and if he is going to say anything it will be nigh impossible to hear him above the roar of the storm. 'Teacher, don't you care about us?' Andrew yells accusingly. Jesus eventually wakes and somehow or other he manages to stand up on this wildly pitching boat and gazes out to sea, unperturbed by the rain slashing at his face. Andrew is clinging to the straining mast and looks beseechingly at Jesus. Then he hears an angry cry from his master – Jesus is shouting not at those in the boat but at the very storm itself. He is commanding it to stop! Before Andrew has a chance to think about how ridiculous a notion this is, the storm abruptly dies. The wind and rain cease from their violence, and waves that only moments before were as mountains become a still plain. The boat calms and the only sound is the gentle water lapping against its wooden frame. A thin band of light appears on the horizon as Jesus turns and looks at Andrew and says, not with accusation but with genuine curiosity, 'Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?' It is a question that is as disturbing as the storm.

Thankfully, most of us do not have to face the kind of terror that Andrew faced, but nonetheless we all know the power of fear. Anxiety is a close relative of fear and regularly stalks the human heart, robbing it of its peace. Even if we have never been at sea in a storm, we can relate to this well-known story. Every journey of faith will have its times of real testing, where to all intents and purposes it feels like God is fast asleep and we are left on our own to face the buffeting storms of life that make us so anxious and afraid. If we were able to talk to Andrew today, I guess he would look at us with real understanding and sympathy. And then he might smile and say, 'Well, in the end he *did* wake up. The calming of the storm was breath

taking. It was almost terrifying to see his power. But do you know what I remember most? It was the look on his face when he asked, “Have you still no faith?” It was the love that shifted our fear that night, not the power. It beckoned something from us.’

He might well advise us that the healing of our fears is not wrought by grabbing God’s attention so he can sort out the storms that assail us. It is about discovering that his restful presence is in every storm-tossed moment of our lives. We and the world we inhabit may feel like they are in frightening turmoil at times. But there is one who is greater than the storm, whose peace is unmoved by the turbulence and terrors of this world. Confidence grows in us when we catch sight of the watery eyes of love that beckon forth from our own hearts a voice of faith that lets the storm know, in no uncertain terms, just who is in charge.

Reflection

What storm of life is making you anxious today? Try breathing deeply and then imagine you are drawing the peace of Christ into that place of anxiety. Then try telling that storm just who is in charge!

Prayer

When the storms of fear rise and threaten to swamp me, let me feel your peace, O my Saviour, and from that stillness let faith rise through the storm.

INFIRMITY – SPACE FOR WHOLENESS

David asked, 'Is there still anyone left of the house of Saul to whom I may show kindness for Jonathan's sake?' Now there was a servant of the house of Saul whose name was Ziba, and he was summoned to David. The king said to him... 'Is there anyone remaining of the house of Saul to whom I may show the kindness of God?' Ziba said to the king, 'There remains a son of Jonathan; he is crippled in his feet...' Mephibosheth son of Jonathan son of Saul came to David, and fell on his face and did obeisance. David said, 'Mephibosheth!' He answered, 'I am your servant.' David said to him, 'Do not be afraid, for I will show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan; I will restore to you all the land of your grandfather Saul, and you yourself shall eat at my table always.' He did obeisance and said, 'What is your servant, that you should look upon a dead dog such as I am?'

Then the king summoned Saul's servant Ziba, and said to him, 'All that belonged to Saul and to all his house I have given to your master's grandson... Mephibosheth shall always eat at my table...' Mephibosheth ate at David's table, like one of the king's sons.

2 SAMUEL 9:1-11 (abridged) (see also 2 SAMUEL 4:1-4; 2 SAMUEL 9:12-13)

There are a large number of stories in the Bible where ill people are miraculously and wonderfully healed through a touch from God. I have witnessed healings of this sort myself, and I have been left speechless with delight seeing someone freed from the illness that had beset them. Such experiences belong in the high summer of joy and thanksgiving. But there is an autumn season in the

human journey that is brought about by a loss of health that finds no immediate cure. This may be a short-term illness or injury, or it might be a much longer-term problem where we are assailed by an illness such as chronic fatigue, or where an illness or accident leaves us with a disability. Experiences of loss of physical, mental or spiritual health can be very disorientating and, in the journey of Christian faith where there are testimonies of miraculous cures, it can be profoundly confusing.

Our guide for today is someone who is found at the edge of the great David stories. He was the kind of person who would have been astonished to turn up in anyone's storybook, let alone that of the greatest king of Israel. David followed on after Saul, the first king of Israel, and the two had a rather troubled relationship. But David was devoted to Saul's son Jonathan. Mephibosheth was Jonathan's son, but when he was only five years old, he lost his father and grandfather in a great battle. As a close relative of royalty, he was suddenly in a very vulnerable position, so his nurse attempted to rush him to safety. As if the bereavement was not bad enough, Mephibosheth then suffered further as his nurse managed to drop him in her panic and he suffered an injury to his legs that left him disabled. Our reading today also suggests that, as he grew up, Mephibosheth suffered from a fairly poor self-image. Many in that culture were not kind to people with disabilities. So he grew up in hiding until the day King David discovered he was alive, and called him to his palace.

We only have snippets of information about Mephibosheth, so we have to use our imaginations to make up what is missing. He is nervous as he travels to the palace of the great king. He looks at his misshapen feet that were so disastrously damaged in that fall. He still feels the ache of bereavement as he thinks back on the father he lost at such a young age. He fears the taunts of those who mock him for his infirmity. His illness feels like a curse from God. So how will this God-appointed king treat him? Will he be in for further humiliation? Or worse?

He is ushered into the palace and there is the great king. He does his best to bow down, and one of his crutches clatters to the floor. Without it he fears falling, but then he feels the firm grip of the king on his elbow helping him up. The king addresses him not in words of formality, but of extraordinary tenderness: 'Do not be afraid.' He has known fear since the day he had to flee his home and nursed his aching feet in a place of hiding. But now he feels old fears slipping from him as the king walks him carefully to a table where a sumptuous meal is spread. He had heard of David's great love for his father, and now he feels that love overflowing to himself. Over the meal, this great but tender king restores to him lands and property that were lost after the fatal battle. In a very short space of time, his life has been completely turned around.

So Mephibosheth makes his home in the palace of the king. There is no sudden, miraculous cure to his disability. He will still have his days of hurting feet and a hurting heart as he hears stories of his father and feels the pain of loss. But something inwardly has been healed. His wounds and losses have found a place in this world where they can be held, and it is in the palace of the king.

Preachers and theologians have often made links between David and Jesus. Indeed, Jesus was often called 'Son of David'.⁹ Jesus was extraordinarily welcoming to people of ill health in a society that was actually rather critical of them. In Jesus' day, those with illnesses such as leprosy were considered 'unclean' by the religious leaders. Rather than avoiding those pronounced 'unclean', Jesus did quite the opposite, and reached out and touched them. Jesus is the David that welcomes the likes of Mephibosheth to his table. Reading the snippets of story we have from his life, Mephibosheth seems to have found a way of flourishing in that palace, which was rooted in his dwelling in a place of true belonging.

We may have entered a season where we feel a new vulnerability due to our loss of health. We may worry about how people will view or treat us. We may be grieving the loss of the good health we once

enjoyed. We may be anxious for our future. But what this engaging story of David and Mephibosheth tells us is that there is always a welcome for us at the table of the King. In reading the Gospel stories, we discover a Son of God who embraced all, no matter what their level of health. His is the table to which we can limp with confidence. It may be that in time we do discover the cure for which we so long. But until such a moment, we can spend time at the royal table and discover what it is to be truly whole in this world.

Reflection

What does it mean to you to be welcomed at the royal table?

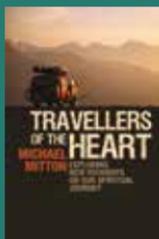
Prayer

Lord, when my strength and health fail, lead me to your table that I may find true wholeness.

Like the seasons themselves, our lives are variable and can change in a moment. In *Seasoned by Seasons*, Michael Mitton acknowledges this and offers Bible reflections for the variety of life's seasons: spring, the season of emerging new life; summer, the season of fruitfulness; autumn, the season of letting go; winter, the season of discovering light in the dark. What can we learn, and how can we be encouraged in each season of our lives? This book will empower you to discover for yourself the truths and messages of scripture, and might well transform the way you view life's changes.

About the author

Michael Mitton is a freelance writer, speaker and trainer. He is Priest-in-charge of St Paul's Church, Chester Green, and an honorary canon of Derby Cathedral. He is the writer of a number of books for BRF, including *Restoring the Woven Cord*, *Dreaming of Home* and *Travellers of the Heart*. He is a regular contributor to *New Daylight*.



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