

Growing on the Frontline

Sample introductory sermon

This is an adaptation of Ken Benjamin's talk introducing *Growing on the Frontline* (which you can watch [here](#)). It is adapted so it can be delivered by a preacher or leader in a church service to introduce the course to the congregation ahead of starting it in small groups. Ken's introduction and anecdotes have been changed so someone else can deliver them.

INTRODUCTION

Here at church we are launching a new small group series called *Growing on the Frontline*, developed by the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity. It's an eight-week course our small groups will be going through together.

Growing on the Frontline addresses a major challenge all Christians face: that even when we want to live fruitfully day by day, all too often, we get in our own way. *Growing on the Frontline* will help us become the people Jesus intends us to be, right where we are – so we can bear good fruit for him, wherever we are. *Growing on the Frontline* uses six Ms to describe ways Christians bear fruit: by modelling godly character, making good work, ministering grace and love, moulding the cultures we're in, being mouthpieces for truth and justice, and being messengers for the gospel.

Through a mix of teaching, Bible study, true stories, discussion, and prayer tools, it encourages us to *reflect* on what's happening in and around us, *receive* God's wisdom and be *renewed* by him, so we can *respond* more fruitfully to the opportunities on our frontlines – the places where we regularly spend time with those who don't know Jesus.

So before we begin the course, I want to set the scene and share some of the key themes we'll be exploring together. The central image for *Growing on the Frontline* is a fruit tree and a key passage is this one I'll read now, from Jeremiah.



SCRIPTURE PASSAGE

Jeremiah 17:5-8 (NIRV)

5 The Lord says,

“Those who trust in human beings are under my curse.

They depend on human strength.

Their hearts turn away from me.

6 They will be like a bush in a dry and empty land.

They will not enjoy success when it comes.

They will live in dry places in the desert.

It is a land of salt where no one else lives.

7 “But I will bless anyone who trusts in me.

I will do good things for the person who depends on me.

8 They will be like a tree planted near water.

It sends out its roots beside a stream.

It is not afraid when heat comes.

Its leaves are always green.

It does not worry when there is no rain.

It always bears fruit.”



FRUITFUL TREES WITH HEALTHY ROOTS

Just think about that image of the tree for moment. There’s a danger that we let the image of a tree go too lightly – it’s too normal, we might have heard it many times. But a tree is a powerful image to have in mind when thinking about our discipleship, our spiritual growth and life. It is a very good illustration.

In our passage here, Jeremiah is using a tree as an image to convey the primary message God has given him. Jeremiah is called by God to warn God’s people, Israel, that they need to turn back to him, and that there are consequences for their actions. As part of this message, Jeremiah shares an illustration from the Lord which contrasts two plants: a bush in the desert without useful fruit, and an amazing tree that never stops producing good fruit.

Firstly, there are those who trust in human beings instead of God. Jeremiah 9 describes them earlier as people who ultimately look for fulfilment in themselves, their job, their status, their friends, or anything other than God. They are like a bush in a parched desert land, here today, gone tomorrow – with no fruit.

But then there is the blessing of someone who puts their hope, trust, and confidence in God. Jeremiah describes this person as like a tree by the side of a river: with deep roots getting the nourishing water they need and – whatever comes their way – consistently bearing fruit. The kind of fruit we were made to produce as Christians.

Jeremiah needed some of those deep roots himself. He was called to some tough stuff: to confront the complacent and to call out the conceited. He was beaten up, he was locked up, and he was told to shut up. But he didn’t depend ultimately on humans, so he kept going.



Now, when Jeremiah talks about trees he is not alone. Trees are consistently used as images in the Bible. There are famously trees in the first chapter and the last chapter of the Bible: the Genesis creation story, and Revelation's picture of the new earth to come. The first Psalm features trees, and so do multiple places in Isaiah. And, of course, Jesus was nailed to a cross which is sometimes simply called 'the tree'. In fact, other than people and God, trees are the most mentioned living thing in the Bible. That is without adding mentions of wood and carpenters.

This gives us a sense that trees almost certainly carried more importance for people in biblical times than we might at first think. We might look at a fruit tree and think 'nice', in a 'take-it-or-leave-it, could provide one of my five-a-day' kind of way. But in the time Jeremiah is writing, everyone is more immediately aware that those trees are significant in their story and their lives. Their fruit is a vital food source. They provide needed oil for cooking and lamps. A tree's shade is often much needed. So, the care of that tree becomes a big deal.

But there is a second reason a tree is a good illustration. With a tree, there is more going on than meets the eye. Out of sight, underground, there are roots. Picture the top of a tree you know and remember. That tree has the same size and spread of roots underneath as the branches you see above. It is the same with your spiritual life and mine, right?

Just ask anyone training to be an 'orchardist'— yep, that's a word — a farmer or grower of fruit trees! They are taught to take care of the unseen things when it comes to fruit trees. A tree in an orchard can be very fruitful for one season, but if it is not pruned correctly or doesn't have a healthy root system, it might bare absolutely no fruit the following year. So, orchardists need to make sure a tree is well cultivated: that it has the right nutrients in the soil. They try to maximise the health of the roots, so they bring in something called a 'subsoiler' which breaks up any compacted ground that might harm the tree's roots. They keep the weeds down, so they don't take the nutrients that the tree needs. They are always looking to create the conditions which give the best chance of lasting, fruitful growth.

INNER GROWTH FOR OUTWARD ACTION

So, what's the parallel for us? What's our human version? How do we look after our 'roots'? How do we collaborate with the work God is doing in us, to give us the best chance of being consistently fruitful in the long term?

The *Growing on the Frontline* course was developed to help us look at that — to help each of us understand and look after our spiritual 'roots'.

It will look like coming together in our small groups, studying some Bible passages, hearing some real stories, and trying some suggested prayer tools and ways to process what is going on in our lives. Over the eight sessions, we will look at how our choices, desires, and emotions can affect fruitfulness wherever we are planted. That is, how we act on our frontlines - the places where we regularly spend time with those who don't know Jesus. We'll look at the different seasons we all go through - including tough times - and we'll look at introducing some patterns and principles into our daily lives that help sustain growth in the long term. Through it all, we'll think about how we can collaborate with God at work in us — recognising that it's *his* work by *his* Spirit that we grow, not our own effort.



Today, though, we're talking about the roots or unseen parts of our discipleship being healthy so that we are fruitful out there, in 'real life' on our frontlines.

Ken Benjamin, one of the developers of the *Growing on the Frontline* course, tells a story from when he was training for his theology degree. The degree ended, of course, with finals: a series of final exams in the last year. His college was north of London, and he lived in west London, sixteen miles away. Since public transport wasn't great between the two, he drove to each exam, past Heathrow Airport. He had a mostly reliable car, but it was beginning to make odd noises as the finals progressed. Can you see where this is going? But he felt he had no time to sort these noises out - he was busy doing the important business of finals. So, he turned the music up in the car and carried on.

Well, Ken's plan worked until the very last day: his final final. He'd gone too far to get back home when the car's intermittent noises became persistent, and too loud to ignore even with the radio on. And then the car stopped irreparably - irreparably, at least, in that moment.

It was his final exam. He had to be there. So he pushed the car to where he could park it legally and got his stuff out. And then - because he was on the road to Heathrow - before long a black cab came by and he flagged it down. He figured it might be costly, but so is the investment in a degree! So, getting there on time was worth it. The cabbie got him there on time, but not before dispensing some wisdom, as only a London cabbie can.

The poor student told the cabbie how unlucky he had been that his car had broken down on the last day of his exams. Ken was stressed and looking for sympathy, but he was looking in the wrong place!

'You haven't been unlucky at all - you don't look after your car,' the cabbie said.

Ken retorted, 'You don't know that. We've only just met, and you've only seen the outside of my car. You don't know how much care I take of the engine!'

The answer was harsh but brilliant. Without pausing, the cabbie fired back: 'I can tell from the outside that you are not looking after the inside!'

He was right.

If *Growing on the Frontline* focuses on the *unseen* elements - our roots - its motivation is that we will be fruitful in the *outside* elements - the fruit we bear. In the end, people will notice if we are not paying attention to creating healthy roots. Because the outside won't look that healthy either.

GROWING THROUGH PRAYER

There are plenty of detailed suggestions in *Growing on the Frontline* for how you can tend to your roots, including using four simple prayer tools - ways of praying which others won't see, but might help you reflect on what's happening around you, receive God's wisdom, be renewed by him, and so respond more fruitfully where you are. For some of us, these types of prayer will be familiar territory. For others, they'll be less

familiar. But even if you are less familiar or not familiar at all, learning to pray in different ways and about different things can help anyone who wants to grow.

The London Institute for Contemporary Christianity has finished research this year investigating the difference that devotional practices can make to someone's discipleship. In the studies, people found that prayer practices really helped them, particularly in key 'make or break' areas of being a Christian 'out there' on their frontlines. One respondent said: *'I think what helped me to keep going was seeing the fruit of them, seeing the difference the practices were making to my week.'*

LICC's research showed that thoughtful devotional prayer prepares us for our frontlines – our working lives, our leisure time, our neighbourhood encounters – it really helps us to grow in fruitfulness. And it's not just prayer in quiet times, but simple prayers we can do on-the-go whilst on our way to work, or at work, or on our frontlines, wherever we are. Those are the prayer tools we'll learn to use during *Growing on the Frontline*.

GROWING BY DOING

That's important, because it's so easy to think of our quiet times as separate from the world, as the real moments when God is working on us and changing us. Or to have this image of our church service as *the* place where we learn and grow, and then we go and apply those lessons when we are scattered. Those things are part of the story – definitely – but times in church or in quiet prayer aren't the only ways we grow. Much of growth happens *live* when we are *out there*.

A student teacher can only learn so much in the lecture theatre. You can only learn so much about batting in cricket in the nets; it's different in a match out on the field. In the same way, a disciple can only learn so much in their gathered times and quiet times. Surely God also wants us to learn discipleship lessons each day, out in the world?

In other words, when we put into practice the things we learn in our community and quiet times, God teaches us *through that experience*, reinforcing our growth as we emulate the way Jesus behaved. *Growing on the Frontline* will help us to bring all these things together – our time with our church family, our prayer lives, and our frontline experiences – collaborating with God as he makes us more like Christ.

Susanna Wesley is known as the mother of Methodism. Why? Because two of her sons, John Wesley and Charles Wesley, as children, consciously or unconsciously learnt from her and applied her example, her teachings, and the circumstances from their home life as children to the rest of their lives.

She had a regular prayer that sums this up – it ended this way: *'May all the happenings of my life prove useful and beneficial to me. May all things instruct me and afford me an opportunity of exercising some virtue and daily learning and growing toward Your likeness. Amen.'*

So may we be those who trust in the Lord and have made the Lord their hope and confidence. May we be like trees planted along a riverbank, with roots that reach deep into the water. So that we can withstand whatever comes our way and consistently produce the kind of fruit our Father seeks from us.

