



LET'S CELEBRATE: THE SEASON OF FRUITFULNESS

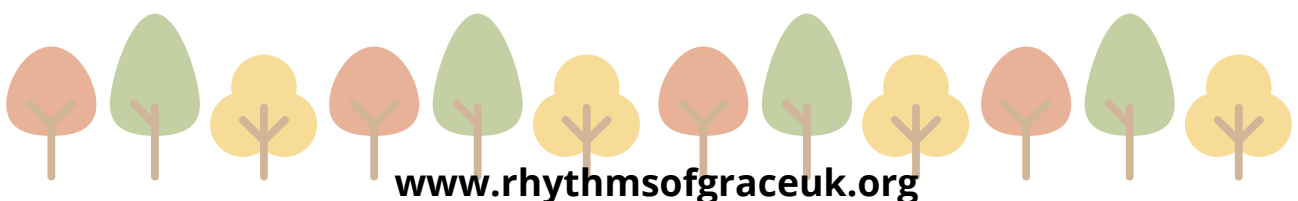
Fruitfulness and provision are two of the big themes in the Scriptures. Fruitfulness is written into the very fabric of the earth, as in every living thing there is the ability to reproduce after its own kind. And the Bible itself is the story of the Lord's desire to have children born of His Spirit and manifesting His nature. Intertwined with all of this is God's provision; from the abundant supply in the Garden of Eden to the definitive provision of the cross, the Lord's intent to furnish the needs of humankind is written large.

This time of year is the perfect opportunity to explore these themes, like our ancestors who celebrated August to October as the Season of Fruitfulness. This was a vital period in their agricultural year, when the earth's produce was gathered and stored against the privations of the coming winter. Naturally, as they celebrated the gathering in of the various harvests, their minds also turned to the Provider of the increase; whom they came to know and worship as the Christian God.

Living in the modern West with supplies coming in from around the world, we are no longer dependent on our local harvests in the same way as our ancestors, and so have become distanced physically and psychologically from the source of our food in terms of location, and often from the Lord as supreme Provider. And living in industrialised societies we also often miss the powerful lessons this season provides.

It's important for our mental health and wellbeing that we re-learn how to walk in step with the natural world. We may not live in an agricultural society any more, but nature still calls us to take notice, reflect and celebrate, bringing a much needed harmony and rhythm to our lives. This season has much to offer if we take time to enjoy it; take a look at some of the possibilities below:

Study and reflect: The themes of harvest and provision in the Bible are worth investigating. This might involve reflecting on such stories as feeding of the 5000, or the parable of the sower. Alternatively we might consider how these subjects are developed in the book of Ruth, how they relate to the Feast of Tabernacles, or we might ponder on the nature of God revealed in the Wedding at Cana, or the miraculous catch of fish. All these topics can be researched using Bible dictionaries and concordances, or the many free resources available online.



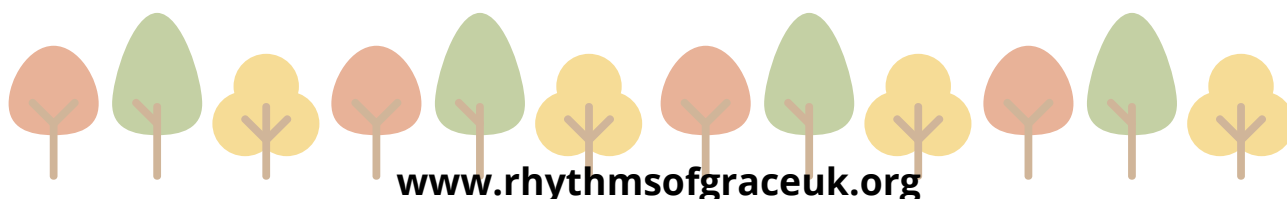
Instead, we could focus on the related topic of fruitfulness, which gives plenty of material to investigate; Jesus' teaching on the vine in John 15 being an obvious choice. Fruitfulness for a Christian includes character, answered prayer, fruitful labour, and the mentoring of others – essentially reproducing the life of Christ in our world. This season is a good time to do a personal audit, asking the Lord to help us with the barren areas of our lives, and perhaps reading biographies of pioneer Christians, for a great source of inspiration and encouragement.

Spend time outdoors: Although we hear a lot about the problem of city-overcrowding, we are still fortunate in the UK to have vast swathes of open country accessible to most by road, rail, bus or bicycle. So let's take advantage of nearby country parks, coastal trails, canal towpaths or areas of outstanding natural beauty. Take time to notice the fruitfulness all around, the flourishing hedgerows, and trees, the wayside grasses full of seed, the fields of ripening corn, orchards displaying their abundance, and livestock with their growing young. Then let's thank the Lord for the richness of His provision, perhaps writing or singing a psalm of praise. We don't need to have the skills of David to do this - just gratefulness! Or maybe we can record our thanksgiving in some other way, for example, with photographs, journaling, drawing, or poetry. The natural world is rejoicing; we need to join in....

***You crown the year with Your bounty, and Your carts overflow with abundance.
The grasslands of the wilderness overflow; the hills are clothed with gladness.
The meadows are covered with flocks and the valleys are mantled with grain;
they shout for joy and sing.
[Psalm 65:11-13]***

Celebrate the harvest: Harvest time is a reminder that God is good and He is the Great Provider. The richness and variety in our food stuffs speak of His nature to provide for our enjoyment, as well as our sustenance. Let's make an effort to patronise neighbourhood suppliers, farm shops or market stalls and sample local produce; maybe also visiting agricultural shows and appreciating the skill demonstrated in exhibits. Perhaps the harvest of the sea could be celebrated, with a sea food special, or maybe fish and chips and a coastal view; or hedgerow fruit might be gathered, and an event made from blackberry picking with family or friends, and a picnic.

This is also a good time of the year to review our consumer habits, to research fair trade issues for the countries overseas who provide many of our basics, the welfare of animals which provide our meat, and the problems facing the land which supports us. We are called by God to be good stewards of His world. Maybe this year we can switch to fairly traded sugar, free range eggs or buy locally farmed meat. Maybe we can't do everything, but we can do something to make a difference.



Cook up a seasonal feast: using locally produced fresh food, try out new recipes to in order to celebrate the Lord's provision. The internet is full of inspiration. Consider inviting friends and neighbours to a harvest supper. Using natural seasonal materials, dress the table for your feast, and make mealtime 'grace' the focus of real thanksgiving.

It's also an appropriate time to focus on bread: In ancient Britain, August 1st was known as Lammas Day, from the Saxon 'hlaf-mas', meaning 'loaf-mass', and was the festival of the first wheat harvest. A loaf of bread made from the first crop was presented for blessing at the local church.

Jesus declared,

***"I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry,
and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.***

[John 6:35]

Today in the west, bread is just one element in our diet. In fact it's often shunned by those in pursuit of a trimmer waistline. But for the Israelites, and our forefathers, bread was their main staple, truly the 'staff of life'. Sometimes we want Jesus to just be an add-on in our lives – but He wants to be the source of life, and will accept nothing less.

Perhaps we can expand our baking skills, and make a loaf of bread by hand, revelling in the process, to symbolise both Jesus the Bread of Life, and the abundant provision of our Heavenly Father. It could be the centre piece and focus for praise at another celebratory meal.

Whatever we do, let's make these months a time of celebration and thanksgiving to the Lord, who provides so richly for our enjoyment. And let's be inspired in our reflections and our recreation by the fruitfulness displayed in the natural world, resolving to make the most of the many riches of this season.

