



ENJOYING THE OVERFLOW: THE SEASON OF GROWTH

"See the winter is past, the rains are over and gone. Flowers appear on the earth, the season of singing has come, the cooing of doves is heard in our land. The fig tree forms its early fruit, and the blossoming vines spread their fragrance."

These words from the Song of Songs seem to be written for a British May, (apart from the reference to rain, perhaps). The next few months are when we see our beautiful landscape at its most glorious best, as the earth brings forth its bounty.

Historically, this month ushered in the important 'Season of Growth', which lasted until July, in the agricultural calendar. In fact the May festivals which still feature in many communities today, have their roots in the ancient revelry and celebration which surrounded this season's arrival. Light and warmth, colour and melody, fruitfulness and beauty had returned to the earth; it was time for a party.

The essence of this season is *life*. Five minutes outside, senses alert, reveals that the whole environment is throbbing with it: scurrying minibeasts in the grasses, a breeze rustling the tree tops, lark-song from on high, or the hum of foraging insects; the atmosphere pulsates with energy. Life brims all around us, and nature offers us an invitation to join in the great celebration.

Unfortunately, it's easy to get so bound up in our hectic schedules, that the joy of these months can be reduced to fleeting glimpses of sunshine through the window, and the annual holiday on the continent. There are numerous studies showing our fast-paced, modern lives are causing real problems to our general health and well-being, while in contrast, other reports reveal that regular time interacting with the natural world, has a very positive effect on our physical and emotional state. So let's be intentional about making the most of this season; in fact let's join the party...

Enjoy the outdoors

Plan for generous amounts of time to be spent outside, asking others for help if there are mobility issues. Enjoy the lush vegetation, the burgeoning trees, the beauty of the landscape, and the scented air. Go for long walks, enjoy local parks and gardens, follow a forest trail or discover rock-pool life. Consider celebrating the long hours of daylight with a Midsummer Picnic, or a night hike; climb a hill to watch the sun setting, or enjoy the emerging wildlife on an evening stroll. Revel in the life bubbling up all around - and also the life within. We are so

blessed to be alive, so let's be as active as possible, according to our abilities, delighting in the things we are able to do, rather than focusing on our limitations. And as we celebrate life, let's worship the One who is the source of it all.

Rejoice

This season is a time for superlatives. It's time to follow the way of Wisdom (Proverbs 8:30) and exult in the natural world, the Creator, and the people He's made. Let's speak out our thanksgiving, or follow King David's example, and write poetry or psalms of praise.

It's also the season for singing; the air is alive with the sound of melody, so how about making music, or dusting off the vocal chords and letting rip? Alternatively, let's dig out some old tunes, and dance our hearts out—remembering this is about joy rather than competence! The Bible is full of musical references, from angelic choirs to jubilant forests; it seems the Lord intended His creation to be filled with joyful sound; so let's join in.

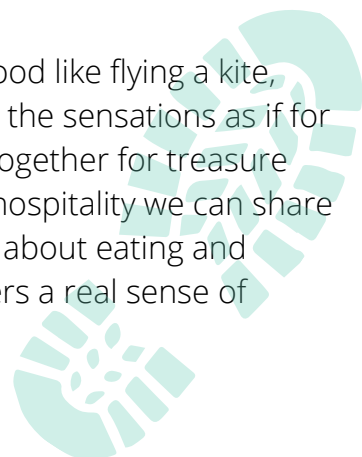
Take stock each day of the many blessings poured out, and consider making a record in a 'Book of Gratefulness'—it's a great activity to do with family or housemates. Laugh a lot, and aloud; research has shown that laughter has great health-giving benefits.

And lastly, let's rejoice in who we are, as beloved sons and daughters of God. We were chosen before the foundation of the world to belong to Him, to be beautiful in His sight, and He delights in us. Now that is something worth celebrating!

Play

We get far too busy in our modern western society; in fact for many people, 'success' is directly related to the busyness of their diaries. But at the same time, there are huge numbers of people consulting doctors about stress. It's time to buck the trend. This season, make time to play, not just leisure time, but actual play; the kind that children do with abandon. Play that has freedom and laughter at its heart, is as important to us as adults, as it is to children. Of course it helps if we have a child to share it with, but even if we don't, let's take some time out to have fun.

Perhaps we might revisit something we haven't done since childhood like flying a kite, riding a bike, building sandcastles or paddling in a river, and enjoy the sensations as if for the first time. Or we might gather family, friends and neighbours together for treasure hunts or beach games, picnics and barbeques. By giving creative hospitality we can share the abundance of the season with others, and there is something about eating and playing together outside, a celebration of relationship, which fosters a real sense of community.



Rest

We need to intersperse our joy-filled activity with rest, with time taken to receive from God; perhaps reflecting on Psalm 23: *The Lord is my shepherd, therefore I will lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures...* There is such a wonderful picture of abundance in this verse—a sheep resting in the middle of rich green pasture. We know that animals are wired to be aware of danger, and to make sure their nutritional needs are met, they will rest only when they know they are safe, and there is plenty of food.

The natural world proclaims the abundance of the Lord's provision. And His word to us, as His 'sheep' is that He will take care of us, and richly supply our needs (Philippians 4:19). So let's spend time in His presence, allowing Him to minister to our spirits, and listening to His voice. And then having received from Him, we have something to share with others.

In addition, nature teaches us that growth is not to be had by striving; we do not see trees groaning in their struggle to bring forth fruit! Instead, productivity is a natural result of the life working within, along with a nourishing environment. So we can be at rest in this season, believing that the Life-giver not only provides for our needs, but is also at work inside us, and as we co-operate with Him we will see fruitfulness in due course.

Be transformed

The two festivals to celebrate in this 'Season of Growth' are both about transformation: Jesus ascended into heaven, and there was glorified; the Holy Spirit was poured out on the day of Pentecost, and ordinary men and women were changed into Spirit-filled evangelists.

Mankind, created in the image of God, was made for glory. And it is God's purpose to restore us to that place (Hebrews 2:10), transformed again into His image by the power of the Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:18). Let's take time out to reflect on these hugely important events, asking the Lord to reveal how each can impact our lives; and then ask Him for creative ideas for their celebration.

Sometimes it's our circumstances which are in need of transformation. In the natural world, occasionally summer can seem very long in coming. However, suddenly the woodland floors explode with luxurious growth, replacing leaf mulch and dead bracken. And out in the countryside, the barren winter terrain transforms, in a matter of days, into a tapestry of vibrant greens, broken here and there with the white of hawthorn blossom and meadowsweet. It's a reminder that when we are waiting for change, our personal world can also be transformed in a moment. So let's not give up hope over long-awaited answers to prayer, because our God is faithful.

Creation calls us to revel in the splendour of this 'Season of Growth', to join with it in its great song of celebration. Jesus came to give us abundant life; let's take hold of what He's offering, and purpose to live it to the full.