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Colossians 1:3-8

3rd Message

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# GOSPEL-INSPIRED MISSION

*SERIES: THE CHRIST-FORMED CHURCH*

## Introduction

Many of you are involved in the business world and know that the company goal is very often to grow the business: to increase productivity, sales, and profits, and develop new products and services that people can't live without. Many of you are working night and day to stay ahead of the competition in order to accomplish these goals.

In some ways we can think of God being in business as well. He doesn't use the business methods that we use – his methods are very different from ours – but his goal is much the same. He also wants to grow his business but his business is not buildings and products; his business is people. His business is to reclaim a fallen and broken world, to extend his kingdom into all the nations on earth, to offer grace in Jesus to every person alive, to bring heaven to earth. He accomplishes this goal through his servants, his saints, brothers and sisters in Christ, you and I, by the preaching, teaching, and sharing of the gospel. The church is the only organization that exists for the purpose of its nonmembers. As I once heard John Stott say, "God is a missionary God" and he has been a missionary God ever since he called Abraham out of the land of Ur and told him that he and his seed would be a blessing to all the nations.

I want to return this morning to the same text we looked at last week to focus on the work of the gospel, not just in Colossae but also in the whole world. However, this morning is going to be a bit different. I am going to share some thoughts and then we are going to have an extended time of prayer.

## The Gospel for Colossae and the World

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all his people—the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true word of the gospel that has come to you. In the same way, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world—just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God's grace. You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, and who also told us of your love in the Spirit. (Colossians 1:3-8 TNIV)

The apostle Paul wrote this letter while he was a prisoner, traditionally thought to be in Rome, to the believers in Colossae, a small city in Asia Minor. Paul's disciple, Epaphras, was a native of Colossae and he shared the gospel throughout the Lycus Valley – in Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis – while Paul was teaching and preaching in Ephesus. People in these cities heard the gospel, the word of truth, and came to know the grace of God in truth. As a result of Epaphras' labors, the gospel bore fruit and caused the growth of a community of believers in Colossae who were known for the spiritual fruit of hope, faith and love. When Paul heard that the gospel was being fruitful in Colossae he was filled with gratitude. Hope in heaven, a living faith, practical love, and a grateful heart are marks of a gospel-formed life and spiritual formation. We talked about these things last week.

What we didn't talk about was this little phrase in verse 6: "...the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world." It might be easy to skim over this phrase, but it really ought to jump off the page for us. Packed into this handful of words are Paul's passion and his vision for the new covenant church. Paul doesn't just want a church in Hierapolis, Laodicea, Colossae or Cupertino. He wants communities to be formed among all the nations of the earth.

## Bearing Fruit and Growing

The Greek term for bearing fruit is used in the parable of the sower in Mark 4 that was our Scripture reading this morning. It also occurs in Romans 7:

**So, my brothers and sisters, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God. For when we were controlled by our sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in us, so that we bore fruit for death. (Rom. 7:4-5)**

It is easy for us to picture fruit – apples, oranges, lemons, etc. A fruit tree produces the fruit that is consistent with its nature, that reflects with 100% reliability the complex genetic information encoded in its DNA. When we were in Adam we bore fruit for death – it is what our "spiritual DNA" was encoded to produce. But now we are in Christ and we bear fruit for God. Fruit speaks to spiritual character, fruit of the Spirit, a Spirit-filled life. The things we do bear fruit. To be unfruitful means to be spiritually barren and unproductive. The gospel bears the fruit of godliness and looks Christ-like.

This last week I happened to be with someone who is involved in wine making and he shared with us how grafting takes place. First the main trunk or root is cut open at an angle and then a branch is inserted in the cut. The cut is then closed by wrapping twine around the trunk and branch holding them together. This is a picture of how we have been grafted in to Christ and begin to bear fruit for God.

The Greek term for growing is also used in the parable of the sower. It means to increase. It is used in reference to growing from infancy to maturity. It is also used in the sense of increasing the number of converts: "So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith." (Acts 6:7) Both of these words, bearing fruit and growing, occur again four verses later, as Paul prays that the Colossians might live a life "worthy of the Lord ... bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God." (Col. 1.9-10)

Paul's passion was for the gospel to spread throughout the entire world. To quote F. F. Bruce, Paul's motto might have been "the whole gospel for the whole world."<sup>1</sup> Paul didn't just want people to join the club or simply to increase members. His passion was for the gospel to be fruitful and multiply, to produce spiritually-formed communities everywhere, to be "colonies of heaven in the country of death,"<sup>2</sup> offering the good news of Jesus Christ to a dark world.

The gospel is God's answer to the broken and sin-saturated world. It is the light that speaks into the darkness and produces life.

Bernard Bell just finished Genesis 1-11, the story of origins, the primeval history. At the end of chapter 11 things are really a mess. God had already wiped out everyone once, except for Noah and his family. But the generations that follow the Flood do no better at following God than the generations that came before, and as we watch the Tower of Babel being erected, we wonder what God will do in light of humanity's insidious arrogance and depravity. Will God again destroy the world? No, rather he would bring salvation. As Bernard told us in his last message, he called Abraham. He told Abraham that through him and his seed he would bless the nations.

Beginning with Abraham, God called a people, a nation to himself. He gave them a land flowing with milk and honey, fruit for which they did not work. He told them how to live in the land so they would be fruitful and multiply. God called Israel his son and his vineyard, because he wanted this vineyard to be a fruitful community and a light to the nations as they lived in obedience to God's word. God said:

**Observe them (decrees) carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people." (Deuteronomy 4:6)**

But instead of the other nations becoming like Israel, Israel became like all the other nations. Israel forgot her God, the one who had brought them into the land. But God was not thwarted. He was still going to be faithful to his covenant and bring salvation to the land, to his people. In the fullness of time another son was born, a son who had been eternal in the heavens with the father. Jesus was true Israel, a true son who walked in all the ways God had commanded. God's own people rejected this son and put him to death on the cross. But still God's plan was not thwarted. God raised Jesus from the dead and he was declared the Son of God, the Messianic King with power. The cross of Christ proved to be God's means of salvation. The place of death became a means of life. What humankind could not do, God did by becoming sin for us, bearing the curse of the law, and setting us free.

After the resurrection God continued to call a people to himself. However, this time, he extended his call to people from all nations. There was no longer a distinction between Jew and Gentile, slave or free, male or female. God scattered this newly-formed people throughout the known world so that the gospel might spread to the four corners of the earth. The disciples were commissioned right before Jesus ascended to heaven: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

Paul defines the gospel in Colossians chapter 1 as the "word of truth" and "the grace of God in truth." The gospel reveals God's grace and truth to mankind and gives hope to people without hope. This is what John alludes to in his gospel: "We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). The gospel doesn't tell you to shape up your life. It is not a plan for self-improvement or a means for you to become a member of some sort of club so you can feel better about yourself. The gospel reveals the truth about God, that he is a loving and compassionate God who desires to have a relationship with us. The gospel reveals God's extravagant grace to humankind to offer us life and salvation in Jesus – and we don't have to do anything to earn it. And as we live out our gospel-formed lives, we are living out the same truth that Jesus lived out.

The mission of the early church was to become fruitful communities spreading this good news throughout the world. And this is still our mission today. A readiness and passion to share the gospel with others is

another mark of spiritual maturity and formation. The whole gospel is for the whole world. I can't think of a better illustration of this vision and mission than the history of our own church, Peninsula Bible Church.

## A PBCC History Lesson

We began as Peninsula Bible Fellowship, a small collection of people gathering together for worship in the late 1940s. By 1950, God had called Ray Stedman to be the first pastor and a community started to grow and become fruitful. When the Jesus movement hit in the late 60s and early 70s, God challenged our small community to step outside it's comfort zone and accept long-haired, barefooted hippies searching for the meaning of life, coming to Christ and beginning to walk in the footsteps of Jesus. It was a radical shift for this conservative Palo Alto community, where originally the women all wore hats! But they opened their arms to include people from every walk of life and as the gospel was proclaimed people like myself, people looking for life, found Jesus Christ. It was an amazing time.

I moved here in 1973 and there was a service in the evenings called Body Life, where 800 people would pack the PBC Palo Alto auditorium. People from every age and walk of life would attend these gatherings to participate in the life of the Body of Christ. In those days, I was a brand new Christian and we always hung around with non-believers – neighbors, business colleagues, the parents of our kid's school friends. I even met my wife that way! She wasn't a believer at that point, but was drawn to faith in Jesus by the life she saw breaking out at Peninsula Bible Church. Sunday nights we hung out – after the service was over -- for 2 or 3 hours; you couldn't get enough of it, and you couldn't keep us away. Even home fellowships in those days were oriented toward non-believers; our elders would set out ashtrays so people could smoke! It was a special time, and God was moving in incredible ways.

Now, we can't replicate what God did 40 years ago, and we can't insist that God work the same way now as he did then. The Spirit moves as it will, but we need to be attentive to what the Spirit is doing and be intentional about participating in this calling that started with Abraham, which became Jesus's mission on earth, and which was taken up by Paul and the Apostles in the early church.

I am not trying to put a heavy weight on you. We all don't have to be super evangelists. We build relationships and rely on God's strength in our weakness. But God prepares healthy and fruitful communities to bless people with the gospel message that leads to salvation. We watch and wait expectantly. And we pray. We pray for our neighbors, co-workers, family members, and community. We pray for opportunities to share Bible stories at the local elementary school and for the outreach service that started here this last summer. We pray for missionaries and for the people living in places throughout the world to which we are drawn, and we pray for how we can be involved in either short-term or long-term missions. God is a missionary God and we are his missionary people. I pray we hear his invitation for how we can be a part of God's grand plan to extend his kingdom to the four corners of the earth.

1 F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*; (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1984), 42.

2 Eugene Peterson, *The Pastor*, (New York: Harper One, 2011), 110.