

Patience With Growth

Producing Fruit Takes Time

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Most of you know that I enjoy growing peaches. It is one of my favorite things to do. Truth be told, however, I enjoy eating peaches a lot more than I enjoy growing them. But you have to do one before the other, so I enjoy growing them and doing all that work.

We have six peach trees here on the property, and also a nectarine and three apples. But it is the peach trees that I enjoy the most especially since the nectarine and the three apples are not producing yet, so I am not seeing anything from them.

The six peach trees that we have are of six different varieties (they are called 'cultivars' in the business—'six different cultivars'). I did that on purpose. I got these specific varieties because I wanted to stretch the peach season as long as possible. I got some early bearers and some medium bearers and I got some late bearers so I can have peaches from mid-June to early August, and that is just fine with me. The unripe fruit right now at this time mid-May is about the size of a Ping-Pong ball. So we still have about another month to go before they are ready to pick and devour. Hopefully, there will not be too many bugs in them. I really look forward to this time of the year.

It would be really nice and wonderful if I could get those peaches to mature and ripen the day after their flowers fall off. It would save a whole lot of waiting. But we know that fruit takes time to ripen to maturity. For these particular peaches, the variety grown and the conditions in which they are grown (like sunlight, soil, rain, and location-whether it is up on a hill or on a hillside) make a difference to how fast the peach will ripen on a tree.

Usually, peaches take somewhere between a little bit upward of 90 days all the way up to about 150 days. And that fits very nicely, once the flowers come out, depending on where you are (ours come out in March), but it is right about the time of mid-June and then all the way to August. So that is really nice that we can have that down here.

This area is renowned for peaches; Fort Mill has a huge orchard of peaches around and it moves off the west, toward Georgia. South Carolina actually produces more peaches than Georgia. They call themselves 'The Peach State.' But California produces more peaches than either Georgia or South Carolina.

Waiting for the peaches is just a part of the story. A fair amount of work has to be done to produce the biggest and juiciest fruit possible. So, not only do you have to wait, but

you also have to do some work.

Trees, like all growing things, need fertilizing. So you have to fertilize them at the right time and put the *right amount* of fertilizer. Bugs love peaches. So peaches are one of those fruits that you really have to spray (unfortunately!). But it has got to be done, or the insects are just going to eat your crop before you and they need to be sprayed again. I tried to do organic sprays, but sometimes they do not work.

At about the size they are now, Ping-Pong ball size (roughly the size of a quarter), you have to thin them so that there are only so many peaches per branch. If you do that, then the tree is able to put more into those peaches that remain than it could if it had to divide all its energies among hundreds of pieces of fruit. So you do not want your tree to exhaust itself. Because if you allow it to exhaust itself on multiple crops like that, it is going to shorten the amount of time that you have that tree for its use. So there is a lot to be done.

Even the harvesting takes time and effort. You have got to get out there and you actually have to pick the tree by hand because peaches are soft. If you try to do it any other way, you end up damaging the fruit.

So it takes a lot of care, a lot of time, a lot of effort. But there is a lot that has to be done even before the tree flowers.

Now I do what the Bible tells me to do. In Leviticus 19:23-25, there are specific instructions about how to grow a fruit tree. If you follow those instructions, you cannot eat the fruit until the fifth year. In the fourth year, the fruit is holy to the Lord.

Especially in the first three years, all that fruit comes off while it is still young (they call it 'circumcising the tree' in Hebrew). You take the fruit off so that the tree can spend all of its energies on various things that are good for establishing it for the long haul. So, during those three years (or four years at least), the tree is developing a very strong root system to support itself. It is developing a thick trunk so it can support the branches.

And, of course, the person who is growing the tree is supposed to be doing a great deal of pruning to get the structure of the tree proper so that you get as much fruit on that tree and get light and air into the center of the tree so that the fruits can get all the benefits of the sun. That takes time. And all this work adds to the ability of the tree, both to bear and to bear for a long time. That is what we want; if you like peaches, you want them to bear for a long time.

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And you can really tell the difference (at least I am able to, with my experience in growing peaches) between a tree that has been cared for properly in its first few years as opposed to one that has not.

So, clearly, there are spiritual parallels that exist between the growth and production of fruits, vegetables, grains, and all those things that come out of the ground, and Christian growth and maturity on the other side.

This is the holy day of Pentecost. The feast of Pentecost is a harvest festival. Its essential underlying meaning and the things that we learn often come out of this idea of it being a harvest festival. This is the end of the spring harvest time and God used all the illustrations that are in that to teach us some very important lessons.

So we are going to look at some of these parallels today. We are going to focus on the fact that growth takes time. That is the major theme I want to get across today.

We cannot expect immediate growth. A lot of times there is a period (like in the case of the fruit trees) when there are underlying fundamental things going on that is really growth, but it is not fruit production. So things are happening; God is establishing us. Especially new members in the church get established in the church and learn fundamental things, and they grow and do the things that are going to support them later on. But they are not necessarily producing the fruit that people can see.

If we tend to have a somewhat critical nature or tend to look down on people, perhaps we are going to look badly on these people. We do not want to do that because they are being worked with. We have to have the faith that they are being worked with and that there will be growth that can be seen, and there will be fruit that will be produced.

That is a major part of what God is doing with us. He starts with us fairly the same, but we all do not take the same trajectory toward the Kingdom of God. He will get us there. He puts some of us through really bad trials; He is able to work with some others a little bit differently—maybe a little bit more easily. A lot of it depends on our personalities.

Trees have personalities. Not all of them grow the same. You have got to work with them, prune them, and shape them the way they should be. You do not have to do that the same with every tree. That is the same in spades with people. We have got to understand and be patient with one another. Growth is going to happen if Christ is involved because that is what He does. He is a Creator. He produces things. He produces fruit.

Please turn to Leviticus chapter 23. We will go over a few of the most important verses in terms of this period of time that we are completing, in the day of Pentecost.

Leviticus 23:9-11 And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: ‘When you come into the land which I give to you, and reap its harvest, then you shall bring a sheaf of the firstfruits of your harvest to the priest. He shall wave the sheaf before the Lord, to be accepted on your behalf; on the day after the Sabbath the priest shall wave it.

These verses are talking about something that would have happened during the Days of Unleavened Bread. After the Sabbath, during the Days of Unleavened Bread (Sunday morning, usually about 9 o'clock), the sheaf would be waved before God. It would be cut the evening before, just as the Sabbath ended, but it would be waved on that Sunday morning. Notice it is a sheaf and it says “the firstfruits of your harvest.”

Leviticus 23:15-17 And you shall count for yourselves from the day after the Sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering: seven Sabbaths shall be completed. Count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath [the day of Pentecost]; then you shall offer a new grain offering to the Lord. You shall bring from your dwellings two wave loaves of two-tenths of an ephah. They shall be of fine flour; they shall be baked with leaven. They are the firstfruits to the Lord.

So here we have another offering, fifty days later, on a Sunday once again. This offering is brought and it is not in the form of a sheaf or any kind of whole grain. It is meal that has been made into two loaves of bread and baked. Unlike just about every other offering, this one has leaven in it (as a matter of fact, it may be the only offering that has leaven in it). What the priest did was, he lifted it before God for acceptance. The next couple of verses tell us what animal sacrifices were made with that offering (there is a burnt offering, a sin offering, and a fellowship or peace offering).

Leviticus 23:20-21 The priest shall wave them with the bread of the firstfruits as a wave offering before the Lord, with the two lambs. They shall be holy to the Lord for the priest. And you shall proclaim on the same day that it is a holy convocation to you. You shall do no customary work on it. It shall be a statute forever in all your dwellings throughout your generations.

And then there is this addition:

Leviticus 23:22 When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not wholly reap the corners of your field when you reap, nor shall you gather any gleaning from your harvest. You shall leave them for the poor and for the stranger: I am the Lord your God.

This is a harvest festival and God, in the middle of the holy day instructions, leaves some extra instructions about how we are supposed to harvest. We are supposed to go ahead and harvest, but leave the corners of the field open. We are not supposed to go back through the field to clean up what we have harvested. We are supposed to leave them out there because the poor have a right to those.

That was how a lot of the poor were able to get food for themselves in ancient Israel. They would go through and reap the corners of the fields that were left for them and they would also go over the rest of the field and pick up any of the gleanings that were there. So God put this in, giving us a clue that there is more going on here.

There is the harvest symbolism that we really need to grasp and the fact that everybody is a part of this harvest. Not just the rich people, not just the land owners, but the poor and the others are also involved. There are different kinds of people, different abilities to sow and reap.

So we have really interesting things to think about. It is a fascinating festival, once you put all these things together.

What we have done is a summary of these fifty days—this whole period between the time of the Wavesheaf offering and the day of Pentecost (the time of the waving of the loaves). Now the observance is called the ‘Feast of Weeks.’ In Exodus 23:16 it is specifically called the ‘Feast of Harvest.’ And, of course, in the New Testament it is called Pentecost, which means ‘count fifty days.’

So we can see from the way that the Old Testament presents it in calling it the ‘Feast of Weeks’ (or the ‘Feast of Harvest’) that this one does revolve around reaping a harvest. The fall festival of tabernacles is also called the ‘Feast of Ingathering.’ It is also a harvest festival. But this one has a lot of ink written in the Bible about the reaping, the sheaf, the loaves, and all the harvesting that is being done. It is obviously a major underlying theme.

Understanding the holy days and how they apply to the plan of God, as we do, as we have been taught over the years, it is easy to see that this entire period—wavesheaf to Pentecost—concentrates on that harvest. And if we put the New Testament symbolism back in it, the harvest is of the firstfruits of salvation. Not just the firstfruits of your fields, but firstfruits of people—a people God has called and planted in His church; people He has tended, watered, allowed the sun to go on them, given them good soil—all those good things; and then they have grown up and have produced fruit; and ultimately they are harvested, glorified, and are given everlasting life.

Let us go to I Corinthians 15 in the New Testament where Paul uses the firstfruit symbolism—the harvesting symbolism—in terms of Christ and the members of the church. He says:

I Corinthians 15:22a For as in Adam all die. . .

We are all in Adam right now. We are all physical beings and we are all going to die. But we have an advantage because now we are all in Christ. So it says:

I Corinthians 15:22b . . . even so in Christ all shall be made alive.

We have passed from being fully with Adam. Now we are with Christ, even though we are still physical, and we have the promise of eternal life. So being in Christ gives us a great advantage over those who are just in Adam right now. Even though this is a fact, Paul says:

I Corinthians 15:23 But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming.

So we see that there are stages of this harvest. There was a firstfruit that was harvested in the past. It was in the past when Paul wrote it here and it is definitely in the past for us. And then there is going to be (now it is future) another harvest. It is a part of the same harvest that the firstfruit was harvested.

Jesus is the first of the firstfruits. But the rest of us are also firstfruits at the end of the harvest, and we will be glorified—given life—in the same way that He was. And so then this matches what is shown in this particular holy day period.

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Christ, the first of the firstfruits, is the fulfillment of the Wavesheaf offering. He was that first ripe barley, as it were; He was cut off; and then the next morning He was offered to God—He was accepted (that was not when He rose).

Remember, when the ladies came to the tomb, Jesus was not there; He had already risen. But He was lingering in the area. He sees Mary Magdalene as she is rushing off; they talk; and He says: “Go tell My disciples that I have to go to the Father, and I’ll meet you in Galilee.” So she runs off and tells them. It was still early in the morning. What did He do? He ascended to the Father for acceptance, just at the same time as the Wavesheaf was being offered there in the Temple on that Sunday morning, during the Days of Unleavened Bread. So that is one end of the time period.

The other end of the time period is our part of the harvest when we will be waved before God. Remember the wave loaves (Leviticus 23:17, 20)? Those wave loaves were leavened bread and were baked. There is a lot of symbolism there too.

We are not pure barley as Christ was. He did not have *any* sin mixed in with Him. He was not corrupt at all. So when He was offered, He was offered whole and pure and good and holy. But we are different. We have to be ground down into fine grain. And then, of course, just because of where we are and who we are—we are mixed up with this world; we have human nature; we have Satan breathing down our neck all the time; we are filled with corruption and are puffed up; and we are loaves. But God is gracious and He offers sacrifice with us.

That is why there were these sacrifices—the burnt offering, the sin offering, and the peace offering—that were raised with the loaves, showing that the loaves themselves would not have been accepted unless they were side by side with those animal offerings—especially the sin offering that was given to forgive us. Of course, that sin offering was Jesus Christ. He was the propitiation for our sins. So, under His blood, then, even though we are full of leaven as these corrupt baked wave loaves, we are accepted before God as pure as that sacrifice was (Jesus Christ—the pure unmarred barley).

So what we have then is that these two glorifications—the glorification of Christ on the one end and the glorification of the church and all the individuals in the church on the other—are bookends to this period. And it fits very neatly with the type: the Wavesheaf offering and the day of Pentecost, and the fifty days that go between them.

The period begins with the waving of an offering and the period ends with the waving of an offering. So what we have there is a picture of Christ and a picture of us where we

are fully matured, fully grown, and harvested, as He was.

So, in sum, Pentecost culminates a period of spiritual harvest in which the firstfruits of the Kingdom are emphasized, the firstfruits being Christ Himself, first of all, and then all of those who are His at His coming—all those who are raised in that first resurrection. Now this time period (the fifty days) or, if you want to expand it out, all the time period of the church (depending on how you want to look at it—the long view, the short view, or the short-short view which is the literal fifty days) excludes almost everything else but the maturation of the church. That is what God is concentrating on.

So there are three views here: there is the whole time period of the church between the death and resurrection of Christ till His coming; there is a smaller one, which is the time of our own conversion, from the time that we met Christ through His calling and the time we are done with our lives; and then there is the literal fifty days between wave sheaf and Pentecost. So there are three views to look at this whole time period.

But what I want you to get out of it is whichever period of time you choose to look at, it is almost exclusively focused on preparing the firstfruits of the Kingdom. It is exclusively concentrated on making sure the firstfruits are ready and that there will be a harvest.

So God is focusing during this time on the preparation of His people—on their growth, their maturity, and their ability to produce fruit—so that they will be able to live and work and rule in the Kingdom of God, just as His Son lives and works and rules right now and on into eternity. Because what He wants is His Pentecost harvest to be just like the harvest of the firstfruit. He is trying to get the same quality out of the later harvest that He had at the very beginning. He wants us to be as much like Christ as possible. So He is putting all of His energies into making us mature, complete Christians. That is His job. And, of course, He has handed that off to Jesus Christ as the Head of the church who is the One that is most directly involved in that.

If we want to look at it from just our perspective, which I think we should probably focus on right now, the fifty days represents the growth and maturity of Christians from the sowing of the seed of the gospel, to the resurrection and glorification to eternal life. That is what we need to concentrate on—our growth and maturity as Christians. If we do that, we are working on the same thing that God is working on, and we are going to have a great harvest because we are in tandem with Christ—with God.

In His instruction on this period, there are a few things that God emphasizes that many people tend to miss. Maybe in our long conversion periods (many of us have been in the church for a long time), we know these things. But other people do not, who are just

new to the church, or they have not really looked into this finely.

I would like to pick up a few things in terms of this harvest. I mentioned before about it being called the Feast of Harvest, but I want you to notice what God says in explanation. He is talking about coming three times to keep a feast before Him. And then Exodus 23:16 (after mentioning the Feast of Unleavened Bread, He says):

Exodus 23:16 and the Feast of Harvest, the firstfruits of your labors which you have sown in the field.

Words are very important. Notice that He uses second person pronouns here. The Feast of Harvest is “the firstfruits of ‘your’ labors which ‘you’ have sown in the field.” Now He is speaking specifically about actual grain. But when you look at this spiritually, new things come out.

Let us go to Leviticus 23 and just see another one of these very specific wordings.

Leviticus 23:16-17 Count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath; then you shall offer a new grain offering to the Lord. You shall bring from your dwellings [from your houses] two wave loaves of two-tenths of an ephah.

So we have two things that pop out here, in Exodus 23 and Leviticus 23. The Feast of Harvest is the firstfruits of our labors that we sow in our fields, and He says the Pentecost offerings are wave loaves from new grain that has been brought from our dwellings.

We do not get it from somebody else’s; it is not somebody else’s work. It is our grain, our labors, from our dwellings. It is very important. Somebody else cannot do the growth. Somebody else cannot do the producing of fruit for you. It has got to be your labor—your fields, your grain—from your habitation—your house, your living. Nobody else can do it for you. You cannot ride anybody’s coat tails.

So these phrases hint that God stresses in this period what His people do (I do not know if I should stress ‘people’ or I should stress ‘do’; maybe both). But what God is stressing here is what we ‘do’—the work we do, the growth we show, the fruit we produce; what we do to produce that fruit; what is going on in our lives, in our field of work, our habitations, our homes, our families. So what He shows here in the symbolism

is that His people are hard at work in their fields and in their dwellings.

Applying these types spiritually, Pentecost tends to emphasize the Christian's work. And it is split between the field, which we could call His external labors, and His internal labors—His habitation, His house. He covers all the bases here. He covers all the outside stuff and all the inside stuff. He covers all of our behavior toward others and things we do out in the world, and then He also covers everything that we think inside—our plans, our devices, our thoughts that lead to our speech, the condition of our hearts, etc. So He leaves us no excuse.

We are working on all of these areas—external and internal—because there is fruit to be produced out in the field and there is fruit to be produced in our habitations. So we can say then that we are being converted, inside and out, and behind it all is it all takes a great deal of work.

A farmer does not just throw a seed over his shoulder and go play billiards for the rest of the summer. He is out in the fields working in all the ways that he has to work to make sure that seed goes from seed to fruit to a harvest. The same is happening with us.

So the period from wave sheaf to Pentecost pictures a time of intense labor, of sowing and reaping, carried out by human beings whose goal is to be offered before God as an acceptable offering. And that is to be glorified.

But we never should allow God to slip out of the picture. He is firmly in the picture here. He is concentrating on what we do. And I think you will see why there is so much concentration on us.

So let us just make sure that we keep God firmly in the picture and show what He is doing, in the symbolism of Pentecost. That is what we are concentrating on—just these fifty days between the wave sheaf and the wave loaves. But most of it happens on Pentecost, in relation to us, in our growth because Pentecost is the holy day that we convene on. It is the one we study most often. We do not usually convene on the Wavesheaf day; it is there during the Days of Unleavened Bread or just after, but we do not really talk about it a lot and we do not really commemorate it publicly. But we do Pentecost. So God made sure that He put in our understanding of Pentecost these elements of Him being there right beside us.

The first one is that it is traditional that God gave the law from Mount Sinai on the day of Pentecost. It was either on the day of Pentecost or it was very close. If you do the math and try to figure out where the children of Israel were at the time, they had reached

Sinai just before Pentecost. The giving of the law, then, is traditionally said to have been on Pentecost day.

So we see God present with us in the providence of His law; that He gave us the standard by which we are to live, the guide, something to keep us hedged in so that we have an overview of what His character is like. If we follow those laws, then we are going a long way toward maturity and growth. And these bumpers help keep us on the track.

The second thing that we learn from Pentecost that shows us that God is there present with us, is that the Holy Spirit was given (which is in Acts 2). So we have the added benefit to the law of God's Spirit. God's Holy Spirit gives us power, strength, inspiration, and all the gifts that we need to live godly lives. If we put all of that help alongside the law that God gives, then we have His mind and His power with us helping us to move forward toward maturity, growth, and the production of fruit.

So two big things—the law and the Spirit—are both shown to have been given on this day. That is pretty significant. They are two of three big helps.

The third one does not happen on Pentecost necessarily. But He is very present because He starts the Pentecost season, and that is that the wave-sheaf offering represents Jesus Christ. So what we see here is that as He was accepted then on the Wavesheaf day, He starts the period and the idea that you get is that He continues right on along through the whole period. He starts it and He ends it. It is at His coming that it all ends, at least for this particular period. So He is present through it all.

So the third one is Jesus Christ Himself, the Head of the church. That is another way we can connect it to the day of Pentecost because He founded the church on the day of Pentecost. In giving His Spirit and founding it on that day, He shows that He is in it and He is guiding it and directing it. So the third is that we have Jesus Christ in us and with us at all times.

We should also not forget the fact that He is the One who opened the way. He started the process. He is there at the Father's right hand, having been accepted. And so, by His blood, then, we can be accepted before God (Hebrews 10:19-22). He has already done what is needed to be done so that the rest of us can follow. He is the trailblazer. He is the Captain of our salvation—the archegos. He is the One that has made everything possible and given us the understanding and given us the help so that we can move along the same trail that He blazed for us. And, of course, His life shows us the way to live. He is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). We can look at Him

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and get all kinds of instructions for how to live this way, grow, produce the fruit.

Romans 5:10 says that we are saved by His life because He is not a dead Savior. He is a living Savior. He rose and was accepted before God. He is there at the Father's right hand. He is interceding for us, helping us, mediating for us, and doing all those things that He can, as Head of the church and our elder Brother, to bring us to the same point that He is. That is His job. He wants brothers and sisters with Him in the Kingdom because His brothers and sisters collectively are His bride. Therefore we are all dearly loved and He wants us to bring us to where He is.

So these three factors then—the law, the Spirit, and Jesus Christ and all the work that He does—are the sun and the rain and the soil for the Christian to use to grow and to produce fruit. These three things are absolutely vital for producing an acceptable harvest for God. They cannot be minimized. I do not want to leave God out of the process at all.

Even so, I really feel that the emphasis during the time of Pentecost seems to be on what we have to do. We just do not sit there. We have growth to do. We have to produce fruit.

Let us look at Philippians 2:12. This is a memory scripture.

Philippians 2:12 Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.

Notice the next verse; it is very interesting.

Philippians 2:13 For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.

It is interesting because it is how I set this whole sermon up. Paul says, "Work out your own salvation. You've got to be in great fear and trembling." But he says, "God is working in you to do this." He is there. He is always working. He never stops working. The Father works and Jesus Christ works until now. They are constantly at work. They are Creators. They are bringing us to fruition and harvest. So Paul is saying, "You need to get on the stick because God is already in the field." He is out there working. He is doing His thing while you are sleeping. Now you have got to wake up and get out there

with Him and produce the fruit, so you will be ripe at harvest time.

So God will do His part of the job. He finishes what He starts. That is what it says in Isaiah 55:11: He sends His word out and it is not going to come back to Him void. It always does what He sends it out to do. So if God says that He is at work, He is at work! If God says He is going to bring it to pass, it is going to come to pass! And if He is going to bring something to fruition and make it perfect, He is going to do that! It is there. It is a given. God will do His part. God is faithful (I Corinthians 1:9). He says that several times throughout the New Testament.

We are the ones though that need prodding every year on the day of Pentecost to get back in the fields and produce that growth and produce that fruit. We need to be told every year that there is still work to be done. There are vast fields of growth and maturity that we need to inhabit, as it were. There is a lot to be accomplished. There is fruit that must be produced.

We are not ready yet. I think the vast majority of us are not ready yet. And so we need to get out there and do the work, to produce the fruit. I know we are not ready yet because our goal is to be perfect as our Father in Heaven in perfect. There is always room for improvement. God makes up for what we lack. But He wants us to have as much of His holiness and righteousness in us whenever that time comes. Our goal is to be in the image of Jesus Christ. There is always work to be done.

Work is the theme of the book of Ruth. Ruth is one of those five festival scrolls that are called in the Hebrew 'Megillot.' Ruth is the one that is supposed to be read in conjunction with the day of Pentecost.

Ruth is a type of the Christian, someone who has been grafted into the tree of Israel. She was a Moabitess and not a native Israelite. She was grafted into Israel and she had to become an Israelite.

Going through the book of Ruth, you notice what comes out about Ruth is that she is a very diligent worker. She is always shown working. She is either helping Naomi or she is gleaning the fields tirelessly from morning till night, getting as much as she can, so that she can help support her mother-in-law. The narrative shows that she is constantly doing something—serving, helping. And the other characters in the story notice this.

But even more important than the fact that she has been working is that she is growing. She does not remain a simple widow through the story. She is moving on. She is learning about what it means to be an Israelite and she is always being commended for

her growth.

Everybody knew about Ruth. She was the talk of the town. Everybody noticed what she was doing because she was working. She had her nose to the grinding stone and her work paid off big time. She marries the kind and wealthy Boaz—a type of Christ.

So the story is that this Christian enters a joyous blessed family. And of course, we learn that this family eventually becomes the family of Jesse and the family of David and the family of Christ.

If she had not done the works that she had shown for Naomi, in Boaz's field, gleaning as a poor person, she would never have received the blessings. No one would have known who she was.

In the end she produces fruit. What does she produce? A baby boy. A little boy named Obed. And Obed becomes the great-grandfather of David, and David becomes the ancestor of Jesus Christ.

The book ends in hope and joy. Ruth has made everybody's life better. Everyone is happy. Naomi had gone from sorrowful and bitter to a happy grandmother. She now had a future. She had something to do. And of course, we are all happy because Obed was born, and he had a son. Then David came along and all those kings. Finally, we have Christ our Savior. We see how God worked with this woman who was willing to work herself and to produce what needed to be produced.

Have you ever noticed, reading the book of Ruth, that it seems to take just that long? It is only four chapters! You can read those four chapters in one sitting without one of your cheeks going numb, as it were. It is a real easy read.

But all of that did not happen in one day. The book of Ruth actually takes place over about a dozen years, from the time Elimelech and Naomi left the land of Israel to go into Moab (they stayed there 10 years after the famine started in Israel). Elimelech and Naomi took their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. Then they married Moabite girls, but they did not have any children.

Mahlon and Chilion die. Elimelech dies. So Naomi decides to come back and Ruth wants to go with her. She wants to stay with Naomi because she loves Naomi. She did not want to forsake her. Then they get back to Bethlehem and all of that rigmarole with Boaz goes on. But then there is still nine months after she conceives before Obed is born.

So the fruit is not produced immediately. There was a long setup. There was a lot happening in the background before Ruth got to the point where she was able to produce the fruit that she was ultimately predestined to do. But she had to show herself prepared for that over long years and she had to show her loyalty to Naomi. She had to show her love for Boaz and do all the things that needed to be done. So it took time. She was working the whole time. There was a bit of waiting and persevering and enduring in all that.

So the big point that we need to understand is that even though it looks like it happened quickly, it did not. The growth took years. She had to go from maybe a silly girl into a mature woman before she was ready to produce that heir of Boaz who eventually led on to David and Christ.

The point that we need to pull out of here is that the growth took time and it took a lot of work.

Let us change gears just a little bit. We are still on the same theme. We are going to go to Luke 13 to the 'Parable of the Barren Fig Tree' (as it says in the New King James). What I want to show here mostly is that we need to realize God's attitude toward this time that we have and the work that we do in producing fruit. So we need to look from this perspective. The "certain man" that is in here—as Jesus calls him—is God the Father. He has a vineyard. We could call the vineyard the church (spiritual Israel). There is a keeper of the vineyard who is Christ. The fig tree is the Christian.

Luke 13:6-9 He also spoke this parable: "A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. Then he said to the keeper of his vineyard, 'Look, for three years I have come seeking fruit [Remember the three years I mentioned about planting trees] on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down; why does it use up the ground?' But he answered and said to him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize it. And if it bears fruit, well. But if not, after that you can cut it down.'"

This parable is important to realize the patience of God the Father and the merciful and kind intercession of our Savior Jesus Christ for even more time for more grace. In studying this, we have to come at the understanding that not producing fruit is not an option at all. A tree's purpose is to produce fruit. If it does not produce fruit, what good is it? That is what God says: "Why is it [cumbering] the ground?"

We know, from John 15:5, that Christ is the vine and we are attached to Him (we are His branches). And He says that every branch that does not bear fruit He takes away. So if we are not producing fruit, then we are good for nothing and we are going to be pruned and cut off. First, we are going to be pruned, and then, if we do not produce, we will be cut off as unprofitable.

So we are supposed to understand, when we look at this, that three years given by the owner of the vineyard (the fig tree) is especially right and good and generous. Those are the three years God has given all fruit trees to be prepared for growth and productivity. So God expected fruit. Even in those three years there should have been fruit showing on the tree. All it is though in those first three years (in the instructions in Leviticus 19) is that that fruit is cut off so that more fruit can be produced. But we get the impression here that this fruit tree never ever produced that. It was totally barren.

So from this we understand that God was especially gracious and kind. He had not done anything in those other years when He did not see fruit. That should have been an indication, at least naturally, that that fruit tree was perhaps sterile; that it was not going to produce at all; that there was something wrong with it. But He had given it the time to prove itself. He was being at least as generous as the law, if not more.

So here we have God the Father being shown as patient, merciful, and gracious anyway. Then we have Jesus Christ who comes. He is the Keeper of the vineyard. Christ goes above and beyond in asking for time and asking for mercy. He asks for patience and grace on this tree. Even though it had not shown any fruit in the time that it should have shown fruit, He asks for more time. This kind of mercy and patience and grace by the Keeper of the vineyard can only be divine. It is so beyond what is normally given that He is shown as exceptionally kind and loving in His working with the tree.

And we can understand this because we have our Savior in heaven as our mediator. He was a man. He lived as we do—better than we do because He did not sin. But He knows the difficulties of producing fruit in the human flesh. He knows how strong human nature can be; how it pulls us to do all kinds of things for ourselves and to fail at producing what is good and spiritual. He knows how difficult it can be to overcome bad habits because they just get so ingrained in us. Sometimes maybe the three years are not enough to overcome them because we just are in a rut and we need to get forced out of it somehow. We may be right on the verge of overcoming it, but we still need a little extra time and a little extra help.

Another thing He knows is He understands the problem of peer pressure. He knows how tough it can be to go against the crowd. And if the whole world is doing something,

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we want to get on the bandwagon and do that too. But we have to overcome that feeling of being solitary in the way we live, and He knows that can be very hard because He lived it. He was the One and Only that was doing everything right during His time. He understands that there was a fight every day to be righteous and to stand out in a crowd of sinners.

We all want to put our heads down and duck and just be overlooked. He knows that maybe that is what is holding us back. So He implores the Father for time and mercy and help for the person who maybe does not want to go against the crowd—to go against the grain.

So then, as the Head of the church, He gives us ample time, plenty of room, every advantage to produce fruit. He is the epitome of patience.

We should not forget that the parable ends with the words “cut it down.” There is always that stick at the end of things, that Christ Himself is the judge and that there is a reckoning (We are all going to have to stand before the judgment seat of Christ). There will come a time when He says “This is the end.” So we have to understand that is always hanging out there. It should be a prod on us to move forward. We never want to get into the position where Christ is even thinking that it is about time. He is going to do whatever He can, but He wants our cooperation to produce that fruit. So He is going to work with us and be patient with us. But we always have to remember that we cannot miss the boat.

Now that we understand Christ and God’s attitude towards this producing of fruit, let us go to I John chapter 2 because I want to bring this back to us and our interactions with one another.

I John 2:6 He who says he abides in Him [meaning ‘Christ’] ought himself also to walk just as He walked.

If Jesus Christ is willing to be patient, kind, merciful, generous, helpful in every way toward us in growing and in producing fruit, how should we then treat one another? If we say we are a part of Christ’s body, if we say we are in Christ, should we not be giving our brethren some of the same breaks that Christ does? Should we not be patient with one another? Should we not be forgiving of one another and forbearing with one another and helping one another?

Frankly, some of us can be quite critical with one another. We tend to be able to point

out everybody's faults. Some of us get pretty close to condemning people who have not started overcoming or have a particular problem. That is not good.

I know it is frustrating to see people who you know should know better and should do better. They have been in the church for 30 or 40 or 50 years and they still have a problem with a very minor thing. It should not be a problem for them to overcome this. But they do time after time after time.

Getting back to my sermon last week about euphemisms, I have known people who have been in the church for 50 years and they still say "golly" "gosh" "gee" and all these other things as if they have never known this. And they have probably heard 50 sermons over that period of time that talked about what comes out of our mouth in our language. Now I am not condemning them. I know, from the example of Jesus Christ, that I need to give those people a little bit of time and space. They should know that that is breaking the third commandment.

It may seem like a silly little thing, but they do not seem to realize that using those words is defaming God. It is bringing Him down to a stupid word. What does "gosh" "gee" or "golly" mean? They are idiot words. They are nothing. They are 'made-of-nothing' words. And, in saying them, we reduce our God to nothing. We do not realize we are doing them. We have not made the connection. It is just as bad, in a sense, as reducing Him to a calf or a frog or a pig or a cat or some other idol. It is reducing Him to something that He is not.

The Bible, especially in the Old Testament (in the New Testament as well), says that He has a holy and righteous name. It is important that we identify Him properly. We do not need to go as far as the sacred names, but we have to understand that He is identified by His names and we need to make sure that the names that we use for Him glorify Him. God has a meaning. He is the Supreme Being, the Divine One. That is true. But "gosh" and "golly" and "gee" are not. They diminish Him. So it is a little simple thing—maybe one of my pet peeves.

But I have to make sure that I do not condemn others for doing that; that I have patience with them; that I do not turn my back on them or rub them out of *my* version of the Book of Life just because they have not been able to overcome this one thing. Because, in many respects, those same people may be far ahead of me in another area. But they have this problem and I need to be patient because I am sure that Jesus Christ is working on those same things in them and trying to help them to overcome. So I need to give them space.

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We have to tamp down the frustration that comes when we see someone in the church doing something that we know and they know that they should not be doing. We need to cut off the criticism immediately because that is only going to cause problems and division.

And we need to remember what our Savior does. He not only remains patient, but He lends a hand so that the tree can bear fruit. The least we can do for a fellow member that is having a problem overcoming a sin is to pray for that person that God gives that person what he needs to overcome.

But there may be ways to help that person overcome that problem and grow. I cannot tell you what that is. But you need to think about it while you are praying. You need to be creative in being helpful.

It may be something that you do not even have to tell the person. There might be a way to bring it up where you draw the attention to yourself and your own struggles to overcome that particular problem, and you are not condemning that other person at all. You are just letting them have the witness, hear the words of how you are working on it yourself, and then let God help them. There are ways to do it. We need to be thinking about our brethren and helping them along.

Galatians 6:1 is a prod to you and me in this area.

Galatians 6:1-2 Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

The law of Christ is the law of love. Be loving and kind, helpful, generous, and patient with the brethren, and help them through any kind of trespass that they may have been overtaken in, if you can. But at least pray for that person, and do not criticize and gossip and tell others about their problems.

It is interesting that these two verses here are just after Paul lists the fruits of the Spirit and said "Walk in the Spirit, not in the flesh." Use those gifts that God gives us through the Spirit to help one another. Do not let them lie dormant. So be full of love, joy, peace, and longsuffering. Longsuffering is one we really need.

Make use of the fruits of kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control

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in your interactions with one another. We certainly do not want to turn our backs on them or judge them prematurely because that is not how Christ was. We want to be like Him. And if we let those positions harden like that where we are judging them or ignoring them or turning our backs on them, that is what creates division in the church and that is doing Satan's work. So we need to make sure that we forbear with one another.

Let us finish in James 5. I hope this helps to sum it up.

James 5:7-9 Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain. You also be patient. [This is what you do:] Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. [And then he says:] Do not grumble against one another, brethren, lest you be condemned [if you grumble against them, it is going to come back on you]. Behold, the Judge is standing at the door.

You do not want Him to overhear your conversation where you are judging and condemning one another. Not good!

Pretty nice warning there from the apostle James. This passage, I have to admit, has been on my mind for quite some time because I think it is especially important for us during this time, just before the return of Christ. I know that Jesus Christ knew what the attitude of people would be at this end time, with knowledge being increased and people running to and fro. I think He inspired his half-brother James to tell us, here at the end time, "Be patient." It is the one thing you need, maybe the most of all. The Lord is coming. Be patient. Things take time. We want things instantly, but things take time to grow.

We need to be more patient with ourselves. We often beat ourselves up before Passover for the lack of growth. But slow and steady wins the race—"inch by inch", as John Ritenbaugh said in a Feast sermon at one time. 'Inch by inch, everything's a cinch'; "Just keep swimming, just keep swimming," said Dory the fish. Put your nose to the grindstone. We may not see spectacular progress, but if we look back over the whole of our converted lives, we are going to see that we have grown. Take encouragement from that and keep on keeping on.

And then James gives us that special admonition: Do not grumble against one another. That is self-defeating. Jamieson, Fausset & Brown's commentary defined 'grumbling' or

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'groaning' as "a half-suppressed complaint of impatience and harsh judgment" where we look like we are trying to hold back, but we half-express it that we have a complaint and we are impatient and judgmental with one another.

In these last, stressful, aggravating, uncertain days we need to be diligent that we put on a patient forbearing spirit with our brethren and help each other across the finish line. So patience is the word of the day.