

## **A Fruit-Bearing Church Life**

**(Fellowship from Minoru Chen on December 13, 2020)**

### **Prayer**

*Lord, we still pray that You would do a new thing in the USA. We still pray for a renewal, even a revival, in all the local churches in the recovery. Lord, we believe we are not overstretching when we pray this way. Lord, the time has come for a renewal in the recovery, for a new phase, a new stage, in Your move all over this country, not just in the ten cities but, Lord, we pray, in all the churches. Lord, we pray for the Spirit to have a free way, not frustrated by us, by our old ways, and by our opinions. Lord, we'd like to let everything go and follow the Lamb. Lead us into a fresh way. Lead us to a higher plane. Lord, lead us into what You want to do today among us. Be with us today in our fellowship. Take another step. We'd like to do the word, to not just be hearers but the doers, practicing these things. And You will be with us. Lord, we do have this faith in You. Cleanse us with Your blood. Anoint us with Your Spirit.*

### **Introductory Word**

Today's fellowship and the fellowship for the next few ones are particularly important. What I will start to do, as the Lord seems to be leading me, is to get into the four items on how to build up a local church, which I shared with you a few weeks ago. The four items are building up a gospel-preaching church, building up a shepherding church, building up a strong, attractive, and rich meeting life, and building up the universal service with all the saints serving in our

church life. Tonight, I want to wade into the first point, which is to build up a gospel-preaching church.

I would like to use another term today as a temporary substitute for *gospel-preaching*, to help us get into the practice of it. I would like to use *fruit-bearing*. A fruit-bearing church life. When we use the term *gospel-preaching*, right away we all have some concepts: get some tracts, go out to the flea markets, go on the campus, stand on the street corners, put out a BFA table. Those things are wonderful, and I think we should do those more. But they are just concepts that we have, unfortunately. I would rather use the word *fruit-bearing*. Fruit-bearing obviously involves gospel-preaching. It involves contacting people and witnessing Christ. It includes heralding the gospel, sharing the gospel, and sharing Jesus with those around us, especially the unbelievers and the sinners. These are things a proper Christian should do as part of daily life. But fruit-bearing is a much broader term. As you know, this term is mainly used based on John chapter fifteen. The first part of this chapter is what I am going to use today.

### **Fruit-Bearing and Shepherding Being Overlapping Areas**

The second area that we need to build up in the church life today is shepherding. You can actually say that these two things, fruit-bearing and shepherding, overlap a lot. If we are to bear fruit, especially fruit that remains as the Lord has charged us, we need to shepherd those that we save or that are regenerated. If we go back to Brother Lee's *God-Ordained Way* fellowship, you will recall there are four steps. The first step is begetting, which is to regenerate and to save sinners to make them children of God, to bring the gospel to them, to help them come to initial salvation. The next step is feeding or nourishing. Shepherding actually begins in this step. Here you are shepherding this new sheep or this little lamb. The Lord said, "Feed My sheep. Feed My lambs." Lambs are the little sheep, the young sheep. The next step in the God-ordained way is perfecting by teaching a younger believer to serve the Lord, to participate in the works of the Lord in a local church. Finally, the fourth step is prophesying for the building up of

the church. This is something that we should teach the new ones, the younger ones, to eventually do.

All these steps – even the initial step of gospel preaching to save a sinner or an unbeliever – are shepherding. I can prove this to you very easily. Go to Luke fifteen, a wonderful chapter with three parables. The first one is on the seeking shepherd, who would put aside the ninety-nine to go and find that one lost sheep. The second parable is regarding a woman sweeping the floor in the house to locate and find the lost coin, again referring to the sinner. Lastly, you have a receiving father, waiting for the lost prodigal to come back to the father's house. All these are wonderful gospel parables, and they all involve shepherding.

Gospel preaching is actually the first step of shepherding, brothers. Fruit-bearing and shepherding totally overlap, but there is meaning and necessity to distinguish them. In the book of John, there are two chapters that must be paired together. The first is chapter fifteen on this organism of the Triune God: the true vine in which all the believers are branches to bear fruit for the multiplication and for the expression of this vine tree, which is Christ. The second is the last chapter of John, chapter 21, which is the story of the Lord's recovery of Peter and the other disciples who had gone to the sea to catch fish to make a living, which was their old profession. After they were assured, the Lord prepared breakfast and fed them. Then the Lord had this one-on-one with Peter. Three times He asked Peter, "Do you love me more than these?" Upon Peter's affirmation of his love towards the Lord, each time the Lord said, "Shepherd My sheep. Feed My sheep. Feed My lambs." This mirrors Peter's three denials of the Lord before the Lord was crucified. The Lord had to ask him three times, probably to remind him, "That's what you did, but I pray for you. So now I am asking you three times." The important point is the Lord's charge to Peter when Peter told Him, "Yes, Lord, You know that I love You." His charge was "Feed My lambs. Feed My people." The Lord's charge to Peter was to shepherd. If you read 1 Peter, you will find Peter's wonderful speaking concerning the eldership, telling the elders that they were the

shepherds of the sheep, that if they did a willing job, the Chief Shepherd, the Judge Christ, will come one day and when He returns, He will give such overseers and such shepherds of the flock the crown of life. That charge from the Lord never left Peter.

Chapter 15 of John is on fruit-bearing. Chapter 21 of John is on shepherding. Next week, I will get into chapter 21. Today, I want to stay in chapter 15 with you. Just bear in mind that these are not separate things. They form a continuum and overlap very much. I would like to remind you brothers that I am not here to give you a lot of detailed and practical fellowship. We will need that eventually, not just for you, but for all the saints. What I will give you today is maybe not at the 15,000-foot level, but it is certainly not on the ground level. Let us say that what I will give you is the 7,000-foot view of the matter of the gospel.

### **Gospel Preaching Being the Lord's Commission**

In 1975, Brother Lee gave some training to the young people, and I was one of them. At that time, I had just gotten married and we had just moved from Los Angeles to Orange County. I was in Huntington Beach and some saints were in Anaheim – those were the only churches in Orange County at that time. Brother Lee had the burden to give the training to the young people. This training is in the book called *Young People's Training*. I would like to ask all of you to get that book if you have not read it. I will not ask you to read the whole book – of course you will profit very much if you do – but I will just ask you to read the first six or seven chapters, where Brother Lee had some particular speaking to the young people concerning the gospel, concerning the Lord's commission.

I still remember that chapter one is on Acts chapter 26, which is Paul's experience or testimony of his conversion on the way to Damascus. We used a few verses there in a couple of international college trainings four or five years ago. The seven items of the Lord's commission to Paul are in those verses. Paul was a special chosen vessel, a witness unto the Lord, and a minister to open people's eyes,

to turn them from darkness to light, to turn them from the authority of Satan to God, to grant them that they would receive the forgiveness of sins and that they would receive an inheritance, that is to receive the all-inclusive Christ, with those who have been sanctified in the church life (vv. 16, 18). Those seven points were what came out in a marvelous way in that first message. Just reading that chapter is worth buying the book. After that first message, Brother Lee began to talk about gospel preaching and about fruit-bearing. He said this, "Fruit-bearing is gospel preaching on the highest plane." That is very meaningful.

### **Fruit-Bearing as Presented in John 15**

Matthew is a gospel of the kingdom. Mark is a gospel of service, a gospel on the Slave-Savior. Luke is a gospel of morality, a gospel on the Man-Savior. John is a gospel of life, on Christ being the life. So the speaking of John is fully from the angle or the view of life, and from that angle, gospel preaching is fruit-bearing. In John 15:1, the Lord said, "I am the true vine, and My Father is the husbandman." These rich words of the Lord have everything to do with God's economy and God's eternal plan to have His Son be this unique, cultivated plant, a vine tree on the earth and the only true vine tree.

Right away after that presentation, the Lord got into the key point of the matter. He could not wait. He got right into the gist of the matter. He said in verse 2, "Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit." You can tell how anxious the Lord was by the first thing He talked about – if you are a branch in Me, but you do not bear fruit, He takes it away. My goodness. The first thing is not some niceties or some encouraging words, the first thing is a warning. That should tell us a lot. That should tell us that in the Lord's heart He wants Himself multiplied as the vine tree. He wants to bear a lot of fruit. He wants a great expression of Himself according to the Father's will and plan. The Father planted Him, but we are all the branches in Him, in Christ.

I like this word *every branch*. The fear is not firstly about the branches. No, it is about every branch. The Lord is after the single branch. Every

branch means every believer, every child of God, every Christian. It is not a group; it is every branch. “Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes it away.” (v. 2a) It is not good for a branch to be taken away from the vine. That means the death of the branch, it's over. Somehow, in some way, if a branch does not bear fruit, it will be removed, detached, from the branch. We know that we cannot be unsaved as far as our eternal salvation goes. Here it must be talking about something else, about our practical joining to the Lord being severed or cut off. In name and in fact, we are still a branch in the vine. But in reality and in experience, we are out. This is the Lord's word.

“And every branch that bears fruit” – He was now speaking positively about the fruit-bearing branch – “He prunes it.” (v. 2b) Oh my goodness, I thought He was going to say that He would pamper this branch, that He would give this branch a medal. No, He said, “I am going to prune it.” This is a very demanding vine. If you do not bear fruit, you get put aside – I can understand that. But if I am bearing fruit, You are going to prune me more? That is right, brothers. This is the Lord's speaking. The Lord is saying this. The word *prune* means to cleanse, to clean up the excess branches that just draw the supply away. He wants all the supply to go to the fruit-bearing part. There is a lot to learn about growing vines. At some point, I would like to talk to the saints about growing vines. A lot of this physical picture applies to our fruit-bearing experience. He will prune the fruit-bearing branch so that there will not be excess branches or growth that will suck away the juice, the sap, or the supply. He wants all of that to go towards bearing more fruit.

In this one verse, you have number one: *no fruit*, number two: *fruit*, number three: *more fruit*. In one single verse, there are three conditions: *no fruit*, *fruit*, and *more fruit*. You and I should know what the Lord wants. It is not *no fruit*, for sure. It is not even *fruit*, my brothers. He wants *more fruit* from each one of us.

“You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you.” (v. 3) I will not get into how the Lord would cleanse us, but it is like the washing of water in the word in Ephesians. Verse 4 says,

“Abide in Me and I in you.” He was now getting to the abiding. Some Christians, especially those of the inner life ilk, love this chapter. They love talking about abiding. Actually, this chapter is not about abiding. Abiding is just a means to an end. This chapter is about fruit-bearing and multiplication. “Abide in Me and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me.” (v. 4) Here we are shown the way to bear fruit. That is to abide in the Lord, which means to be one with the Lord, to be joined with the Lord all the time. I will also not get into this because this is not my burden today.

Verse five: “I am the vine; you are the branches” – we all know this famous word of the Lord. “He who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit.” Now we come to the fourth term: *much fruit. No fruit, fruit, more fruit, much fruit* – the Lord wants us to get it. “For apart from Me you can do nothing.”

Verse six says, “If one does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is dried up.” Now He was making this a little bit more vivid. He was making it pretty plain. The branch is not just taken away. He is to be cast out as a branch and is dried up. “And they gather them and cast them into the fire, and they are burned.” (v. 6b) Please do not ask me how this is going to take place. I just know that this is the Lord's word. If these are branches, these are not unbelievers. These are Christians, including you and me. If we do not bear fruit, we are going to suffer the consequences as described: cast out as a branch, cut off, gathered, cast into some kind of fire, and burned. I just know that this is not a good fate, not a good way to end anything. That I know.

Verse seven is: “If you abide in Me and My words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you.” This is a very important verse concerning fruit-bearing. It is about our prayer for fruit, the need for His *rhema* words to dwell within us so that we can pray them back to Him in our prayers for fruit – prayers not for our gain, our profit, or meeting some need of ours, but for His fruit, for His growth.

“In this is My Father glorified, that you bear much fruit” – again, much fruit – “and so you will become My disciples (v. 8).” Fruit-bearing has to do with the Father's glory, which means the Father's expression. I am looking at a tree outside in my yard. If it were a fruit tree and, year after year, season after season, it did not bear fruit, I would chop it down. I did not plant that for looks. I planted it for fruit. If it does not bear fruit, there is no glory there, there is no beauty there. The beauty of a fruit tree is its fruit. Brothers, we are all branches of this vine. This vine is both Christ and the church. The beauty of Christ and the church is in their expression through multiplication, through growth. In this is the husbandman, the Father, glorified. There is a lot here.

I will now jump to verse 16: “You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and I set you that you should go forth.” We did not choose the Lord. He chose us. Every one of us is an elect, a chosen one of the Lord. But He did not just choose us, He set us. He fit us, He placed us, in this vine, in Himself, that we should go forth. In the last chapter of Matthew, chapter 28, is the so-called Great Commission where the Lord said, “All authority has been given to Me. Go therefore and disciple all the nations.” (vv. 18b, 19a) “Go therefore” was the Lord's commission in Matthew. In John it is to “go forth.” It is the same idea: do not stay where you are. It is echoed in Acts: the disciples are to be His witnesses first in Jerusalem, then in Judea and Samaria, then to the uttermost part of the earth (1:8). Go forth. Here in John, you need to go forth and bear fruit.

Brothers, it is very clear: according to this chapter, we have nothing else to do as a branch, except to go forth and bear fruit. So you see why the Lord is so strong, so intolerant, when it comes to a non-fruit-bearing branch. We may think, “Fruit or no fruit, no big deal.” But to the vine tree and to its husbandman, it is a huge deal, it is the only deal. The only deal is to go forth and bear fruit. There is nothing else to talk about. If there is no fruit, this tree has nothing that we can talk about. Brothers, do we think this way: gospel preaching is optional, fruit-bearing does not matter? Please read this chapter again. It is in the Bible. It is the Lord's word to each and every one of us. We have



to take this chapter seriously, and we have to help the saints to do so also.

Verse 16 continues, “You should go forth and bear fruit and that your fruit should remain.” This is the fifth description of fruit: *remaining fruit*. Now we have *no fruit, fruit, more fruit, much fruit, remaining fruit*. Fruit that remains. “That whatever you ask the Father in My name, He may give you (16c).” By implication or by inference, it would not be wrong to say that this asking of the Father in verse 16 hearkens back to the asking earlier in verse 7. This is not asking for this or that. In the context of this chapter, this is asking for fruit, that He may give this fruit to you.

Verse 11 says, “These things I have spoken to you that My joy may be in you and that your joy may be made full.” The Father gains the glory, the Son gains the fruit, and brothers, we gain the joy, the real joy.

### **Fruit-Bearing Being the Only Purpose of a Branch in the Vine**

The way to build up a gospel-preaching church is with we brothers taking the lead to live the life of a branch in the vine. The purpose is very definite and clear to bear fruit for the vine. That is our church life. A branch has nothing else to do. It is just there on the tree. Its only job is to bear fruit. If it does nothing else, it just bears fruit. We say “Beautiful. Glorious. Wonderful.” But if it does not bear fruit, whatever else it does means almost nothing.

Brother Lee helped us to see that there are different kinds of fruit in the New Testament. For example, in Galatians there is the fruit of the Spirit with all these many wonderful, divinely human virtues. Brother Lee made a point that the fruit in John 15 does not refer to the fruit in Galatians 5. Rather, in John 15 the fruit refers to persons, human beings, sinners, and unbelievers, like we once were. Now that we have been born as fruit, we have become branches in the vine. Fruitbearing has to go on through us: other fruit will be born, those fruit will become branches, and they will, in turn, bear more fruit. This vine would spread itself around the globe, around this earth, to be glorified

with so much fruit. Across time and space, there are millions and billions of believers. What a glorious vine. What a beautiful vine.

### **The Lack of Increase in the Lord's Recovery**

The Lord's recovery has been in this country for almost 60 years, with Brother Lee personally ministering among us for 35 of those 60 years in his most mature ministry. In other words, we got the best plant food supplying the vine. We have had no shortage of supply. But let us look at the fruit of the Lord's recovery in these almost 60 years. During the first 10 to 12 years, we grew in L.A. There was a little something in New York City, but let us just talk about L.A. At the very beginning, in 1962, about 30 saints came out of Westmoreland Chapel. By 1974, we were 3,000 people or more. That was a hundredfold increase in 12 years. Brother Lee had this burden that this growth trajectory would continue, so that in another ten years, there would be 100,000 saints. He actually created a graph, did some exponential mathematical calculations, and turned it into a table. It did not happen. In the mid '70s, the opposition against us started, blockading and demoralizing us. Then we had our first rebellion, which was a punch in the gut. This double whammy – one from outside and one from inside – stopped us in our tracks. By the late '70s, we had come to a standstill as far as increase was concerned.

Through the years, there have been increase and gain. But if you jump right from that time, say 1980, to today, that is a period of 40 years. And today in the United States, we have about 25,000 saints. If you include Canada, we are closer to 30,000. That is after 40 years. Brothers, to me, that does not sound like *much fruit*. There is *fruit*, but that does not sound like *much fruit*. It is not that we have no burden, or that we have not tried things, or that we have done nothing. It would be unfair to say that. But I am just looking at the bottom line. What is the result? What is the result, not only in the number of saints, but in the condition of the church life today? How much are the saints really living this life of fruit-bearing as a normal course of things? Generally, it is on the weak side. I would not say that there is nothing. We have full-timers. We have many saints opening their homes. Many

saints are burdened. But many churches have the same number, or are even decreasing in number rather than increasing.

Brothers, let me add in another factor. According to Brother Watchman Nee, 50% of our increase should be from the outside and 50% from the inside, meaning our own children. Let us consider our children and our young people over a ten-year period: six years in junior high and high school plus four years in college. In Southern California, and I think other places are not too different, we lost one out of two of our own children over this ten-year period. We see 50% attrition of our own kids. So when I say fruit-bearing, it is not just bearing fruit with people from the outside. I include bearing fruit, remaining fruit, from our own children. We are losing numbers there as well. We may just be perpetually breaking even. We may be hemorrhaging on one side and gaining on the other side, such that we have a net zero, or just 2%, or just 3%, increase.

Brothers, I am talking in a very open-hearted way to all of us, with no thought of criticizing, condemning, or being negative or hopeless. If I were hopeless, I would not be talking. Brothers, we need to look at this square in the face. If we cannot not face this, what are we to do? The burden is not to just do another round of gospel campaign or another round of BFA distribution, which are good things. The only way is for all the churches to normally, regularly, and commonly be in a fruit-bearing mode, a mode where fruit-bearing is foremost in our church life, where it is not something that we do when we stir each other up, but something that we normally do.

Brother Lee went back to Taiwan because of the lack of increase and the lack of a way for the saints to live this kind of fruit-bearing life to gain the increase. That was why he went to Taiwan, and that was why he came back to the United States with the so-called God-ordained way. But alas, we did not pick it up and practice it adequately. I certainly did not. He came back to this country around 1990. It has been 30 years. Brother Lee said, "If you do not work it out, the Lord will work it out in 30 years or in 50 years. If you do not work it out, the Lord will raise up another group to work it out." He said that. I was

just trembling when I heard that. “Lord, really? It won't be worked out in my lifetime? You have to go to another people to work this out? Really, Lord?”

Brothers, I want to pass on this burden to you. I hope I'm not speaking just to the 70 brothers of the 10 GTCA cities. I hope I'm speaking to all the brothers in all the churches. In fact and in reality, we all have this need, not just the GTCA cities. Every church in the US is “GTCA”, not just the 10. But I sure would like to see the 10 GTCA cities take the lead and have a breakthrough into a new territory in this matter of gaining a solid, normal increase. Now, I would like to turn to applying this word to help us to practice this. I don't want to just talk about burdens. The matter is great and broad, so I cannot talk about everything.

### **Fruit Bearing during the Pandemic**

Let us take, for example, the pandemic during this lockdown season that we have been in for the last eight months or so. It looks like there are two vaccines ready to go - I think the Pfizer vaccine will be ready to go next week and they are delivering it already. First to the frontline medical personnel, then to the older population, and then on down to the younger generations. Someone said today that if everything goes well Pfizer can vaccinate 100 million people by March 2021. But then we still have approximately 230 million remaining in the U.S. population. So even if everything worked out perfectly, we are targeting next summer. Next summer is a very aggressive prediction for the whole population to be generally receiving this vaccine. Also, there's still a lot of unknowns (e.g. the long term effect of this vaccine, etc.). There still will be a period of time where our church life will be confined and meetings will not be entirely in-person. My question to you brothers is what do we do? I'm speaking with regards to fruit bearing. What do we do? Do we wait until everything's over and we're back to normal? I would like to put this forth in a very practical way – there is a great possibility for us to help the saints build up the fruit bearing life and to begin to bear fruit even during the pandemic.

## Two Testimonies

I would like to cite two testimonies. First, there is this dear brother in Reno, Nevada who took this speaking in a very serious way. He's a business person, a very spiritual brother, and absolute for the Lord's recovery. He said to himself "I have to start myself. I can't just tell other people to do things, I have to do it first. To me, that is the first major breakthrough. I talked about budgeting time and being disciplined to give time to the Lord to bear fruit, which are all things that Brother Lee share with us already. He gave the Lord 1 hour and 10 minutes per week, 35 minutes on Lord's Day, and 35 minutes on Wednesday, from 7:00 am to 7:35 am. I give you these numbers because they are real and they prove how disciplined this brother is and how practical he is. This is not just talk or doing things when one is inspired. No - this is budgeting. This is serious business. And this brother is a busy man. Over the last few years, he has taken Brother Lee's word and my fellowship regarding starting with "your own Jerusalem." Do you recognize that saying? Your own "Jerusalem." Then on to your "Samaria", and then to your uttermost part of the earth. We all have a little universe. These are our relatives, friends, colleagues, neighbors, etc. This brother in Reno accumulated over 70 names. And in the morning for 35 minutes, he would contact these people one-by-one by email, text, social media, etc. Probably not 70 individuals each week, but rather in a kind of a rotation. These are people he is burdened for. This brother shares these things with the ones he contacts: a verse for the day that he was touched with from the Lord, an excerpt from the BFA gospel page whether a video, tract, or a blog. He gives some substance to the recipient. Then he offers a prayer for the person.

I have not received any reports or results, as the brother testified to us that he has just started to do this. Except for one individual, no one has rejected him. So, the brother is continuing to contact people in this way. Actually, during the vital group training Brother Lee has talked to us many times about doing this. He said to give the Lord an hour, or half an hour every week, a set time - just like an appointment

with the Lord. He talked about writing letters, sending tracts, inviting people for dinner. Do something every week for the bearing of fruit. And this brother is doing this during the pandemic. I was so inspired, brothers. I think there will be fruit. Maybe not all 70 will be remaining fruit, but there will be fruit. This is farming. This is a long-term labor. This is fruit bearing. This brother is serious. If Brother Lee were here today, he would be jumping up and down.

Imagine if, in your church of 30 or 50 people, a third to half of the saints did this - consider how this would affect your church life right away. This would make your church a fruit bearing church, a gospel preaching church. When the time comes and when the result comes in, it will stir up the saints even more. The fruit bearing becomes a priority in a local church, and not the last thing we do when we have time or when we remember to do it. We must turn everything upside down, brothers. Gospel preaching is major. It is the unique commission of the resurrected Christ. Our being constituted with the truth is for this, our growth in life is for this, to multiply to bear fruit for glory of the Father. Build this up, brothers. We can start during the pandemic now.

Second, another testimony. I hope the Lord will cover me to give this testimony, since it's about my wife. We all are in this pandemic. She always had this burden for the gospel, and especially for her family. She has this burden for her niece, a young mother who is unsaved and is going through something. She started praying for her and then contacting her via Zoom and email over the last two months. But the prayer has been there long before that. She even asked us, the family, to pray. Then about a month ago, one day she burst forth from her study and said "You know what? She received the Lord. My niece just received the Lord." Wow! She could not stop talking, she was so happy. She was so excited. The Lord answered the prayer as the Father. What you asked will be done. It happened! The joy! The glory! Now she wants to make this one a remaining fruit. Now the shepherding has started, the nourishing, the reading of the Bible, the praying to touch the Lord, the shepherding in in various things.

Brothers, this pandemic should not stop anything and cannot stop anything. We can either take this pandemic as an excuse just to tread water and wait or we can advance during the pandemic and build up the church. I would submit that Zoom and email makes our contact of people easier. You can visit people at the touch of a button. This kind of face-to-face contact can be very intimate and very dear. During the pandemic, we all have a little more time to pray. We have more time to write. We have more time to Zoom in this way. We should take this seriously. Brothers, we don't need to wait. I'm not going to praise the Lord for the pandemic - that's too much. But on the other hand, I said "Lord, this pandemic is of You. It is one of those things where "all things will work together." This must be one of those things. Also, during the pandemic, in these days of confusion, people are more needy. Do you know about the state of divorce, and the breakdowns of families and marriages during the pandemic? People are stuck in the same house and they cannot stand each other. They are tearing each other apart. Mental health issues such as depression and anxiety abound. The need among men for eternity comes up more than ever in these troubled and trying times.

People are ready for the gospel, the Word of the Lord. They need love, peace, joy, hope, which only the gospel can give. Regarding the breakups in marriage and families due to people being cooped up – can we turn that around? Can we turn that around brothers, and use this time to strengthen our marriage, to build up our family, humanly and spiritually? I gave two messages – one in Spain and the other in Dallas. The first message covers "A Holy Marriage for God's Purpose. The second message covers "A Godly Family for the Church Life." In these pandemic days, we should strengthen our marriage. We should build up our families in the Lord.

### **A Word of Encouragement in Romans 5**

Brothers, I don't know how to say this, but nothing should stop us. This morning I gave a word to the church in Irvine, which is pretty rare nowadays. I tried to encourage the church because of the pandemic. I used Romans 5, after the mentioning of justification by faith. Romans

5:2 starts with "...by faith into this grace in which we stand" – that means to be saved. We boast in the hope of the glory of God; we have a hope. But Paul didn't stop there. Paul continued and said that besides this, there's something else. Romans 5:3, "And not only so, but we also boast in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces endurance." We don't just boast in the hope, we boast in tribulation, which works endurance, which works approvedness, which works out hope. This hope will not put us to shame because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. I talked to the saints in Irvine about the upcoming training on Job. Why did Job have to suffer? Romans 5 explains it. Now that we're saved, why do we have to suffer? Well, it is God's ordination. The tribulation is needed to consume our old man. That is God's way to let the outer man decay and be dismantled so that the inner man can be renewed day by day. It is through that we have renewal. Finally, I used Romans 15 that contains four descriptions of God: the God of endurance, the God of encouragement, the God of hope, and the God of peace. I told the saints that the Lord's purpose for allowing Job to suffer is not to make him suffer, but to strip the natural man so that Job would gain God. At the end, Job said, "I heard of You, but now my eyes have seen You." He gained God in a subjective way. I encouraged the saints - take God, pursue God, gain Him. Take, pursue and gain the God of endurance, the God of encouragement, the God of hope, the God of peace in these trying times. These times are wearing us out, stripping us, causing suffering. But if we pass through these times with no gaining of God, that is a waste of time. If we pass through these months, I told the saints, these hard months, and we gain the Lord, that's more than worthwhile. That has an eternal weight of glory, by this momentary time of affliction. My point is to gain our children, to save our children, this is the internal increase. This is part of fruit bearing. The parents have to bear fruit with their children. My burden this afternoon is that we don't need to wait until next summer. No need to all.



## Concluding Word

Next week, I would like to get into shepherding. Look, so many saints have begun to migrate – about 130 to 140. Brothers, the church may be dropping in the number of young people in our meetings because of the pandemic. Fifty percent are dropping off in the meetings. So they're calling for mothers and fathers in the church to pick up a burden for one or two of our own and to reach out to them. I said that not only young people have needs, older people also have needs. All the saints have needs. New migrants have needs. We need to give the Lord just an hour or more. In whatever way the Lord would lead you, make that phone call or contact that saint in a very divinely, human way. "How are you doing?" Make a connection. Everyone is hungry for a connection. How about eating a meal with them on Zoom? That's like eating together except you cannot smell their food.

I'm going to talk about shepherding next week. Start with "your Jerusalem" like this brother in Reno. Write down the names and start praying. Then as the Lord leads you, contact them, reach out to them. We have an abundance of materials, gospel materials. On the BFA website you'll find materials. It's really about the heart and of being people centered. The pandemic is a great time to build up a people-centered church because you don't even have a meeting hall to clean. Use the time to contact people. Amen.

## Questions and Responses

*Brothers, I mention some experience that we've had in Atlanta. About this time last year as the brothers were considering our goals and focus in the church life for 2020. Of course, we didn't know about the pandemic at that time. We had a lengthy fellowship during a retreat. One of the things that came from it was a real conviction about this matter of the gospel, and that we had not paid attention to or emphasized the gospel. Out of that fellowship, we set a goal that we presented to the church. It was that we should endeavor that each saint would bear one fruit a year. To that end, we took 10 minutes every Lord's Day meeting to have a gospel fellowship time. We went*

*very slowly through the vision portion of the gospel, related to John 15. Then we had some very practical fellowship related to having a gospel partner to pray with and the making a list of people to contact. We also introduced the saints to the BFA gospel tracts and videos. Brothers, it's almost embarrassing how that little bit of effort produced significant gain. We have discovered that over 100 people received the Lord through the saints this year, which shocked us. This was done in a very, somewhat normal way, we didn't have any gospel meetings, we didn't have a gospel campaign. These were coworkers, neighbors, friends, family members of the saints, and close to 120 received the Lord this year. We just have repented, "Lord, where have we been?" Why have we not had this kind of a focus in a normal way? And this is among a number of four focuses that we've had in the church. Just this little bit of time and this awareness of the gospel has made a huge difference in the saints. Even my wife recently preached the gospel to somebody at a gas station. She said, "I would have never done that if we hadn't been fellowshipping about the gospel on the Lord's day. I just all sudden have an awareness that people need the gospel." Anyway, I just say that as an encouragement and support to Brother Minoru's fellowship tonight.*

That is very good. It is small, but it is not small. Once something becomes culture, becomes atmosphere, it will carry on. I have not covered a lot of things today. How to lead, encourage, and even equip the saints for this burden. Yes, that has to be transmitted in a regular way into the church. It has to get into the bloodstream, so to speak. One, we don't even do that in a particular way. Number two, the gospel in reaping times is very encouraging to the whole church. It stirs the church, the hearts of the saints, when you see new ones. Many are doing that on Zoom and so forth. It's like a sowing with tears and reaping with joy. There are a lot of things we can do to build the gospel atmosphere in the church. What I'm touching here today is the basic of the basics. The saints need to have a consciousness that they are a branch. There are many metaphors used in the New Testament. One is to fish. We are all fishermen. We are also reapers. We press into the harvests and reap. This matter of bearing fruit is primary,

especially in this gospel of John. I also didn't touch on the matter of gospel companions. Eventually, we still do the work personally, but we have companions, twos and threes that we labor with together because it ensures that we will support one another. When I become weak, you strengthen me. When I forget, you remember. This is the kind of what we call a collective fruit bearing process. I have not touched on any of these matters. I'm very happy that Atlanta is getting into those things. I'm very happy to hear that.

*Yes, we really feel like it's not a matter of technique, but it is a matter of building up a particular atmosphere in a church. That we're looking outward, we're looking at our neighbors and our friends, and our co-workers, and realizing everyone has a God-shaped vacuum in them. Just the awareness, we just realized it makes such a difference.*

By the way, if you go to YouTube and search for Bibles for America, you will see a video of our new distribution center. It opened during the pandemic. Also, there is a blog post that we put out every year around this "Christmas" time. Because everyone is a little bit more spiritually aware around this time. We have a new, fresh video on the matter of the significance of the Lord's birth, with a goal of course of the gospel.