

Fruitfulness on the Frontline Sermon Outlines

Reflections on Fruitfulness in the Bible

This is one of three sample sermon series outlines
prepared by Antony Billington & Neil Hudson
to support the Fruitfulness on the Frontline DVD course
The others are:

The Central Texts used in the course

Fruitfulness at Colossae

They can be found at
www.licc.org.uk/fruitfulness
together with further supporting material



**FRUITFULNESS
ON
THE FRONTLINE.**

A Word of Orientation

We are preachers. We've been doing it for a long time now. After all these years, we've found our own voice. It took a long time, but it was worth the wait. It means we can preach out of who we are, not trying to imitate others. It means we can preach from our own engagement with Scripture, supported by the reflections of others.

So if we were reading these outlines as preachers, we would be suspicious and intrigued. We'd be suspicious because we don't want to pass other people's material off as our own - too much guilt lies that route! On the other hand, we'd be intrigued. We would look through the texts - many well-known - and wonder whether there was anything new there. We're aware there is still much to learn, and so would be interested to see how someone else was reflecting on them.

What follows is not a series of polished sermon outlines. They are not crafted as a finished product ready for preaching. Instead, what follows are the sorts of notes we might write for ourselves during sermon preparation. As such they are offered as part of a conversation with preachers - the kind of thoughts we would have shared with you if we had been able to sit together over a coffee and an open Bible. What are missing are your thoughts, the ones that start, 'Yes that's great, but did you see...' with the prospects of opening up further exploration. That's our hope anyway.

Overall, we trust that there are kernels of thought here that will enable you to engage with the biblical passages in fresh ways - for the sake of those to whom you minister - in ways that stir up the enthusiasm of the Spirit, the one who both makes possible the prospect of fruitfulness and promises that this will be the normal Christian life for all who remain in the vine.

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Introduction to These Reflections on Fruitfulness

This series looks at the motif of ‘fruitfulness’ in different parts of Scripture, tracing the theme through the biblical story as a whole. Whilst it does not track with the sessions in the Fruitfulness on the Frontline DVD, it would helpfully supplement and complement the course - either whilst small groups are going through it or afterwards. It would fill out the concept of ‘fruitfulness’ from a broader biblical-theological perspective and potentially add other dimensions which might extend people’s engagement with the material in the course. Indeed, a number of factors might make this sermon series on the fruitfulness theme a good option for some congregations:

- It fits with the resurgence of interest in looking at the story of Scripture as a whole from beginning to end, along with the themes that unite its different parts, all focused on Christ. It thus allows us to see fruitfulness as bound up with the larger biblical drama of creation and covenant, promise and fulfilment, God’s relationship with his people and his plan for the nations.
- It encourages a reading of the ‘big picture’ of Scripture through the prism of a fairly pervasive (though not usually explored) biblical motif. Not only are there many passages related to fruitfulness and horticulture throughout Scripture, but the Bible itself is bookended by such images, from the Garden of Eden to the new Jerusalem.
- It allows us to see different types of ‘fruitfulness’ in the Bible and explore the relationship between them.
- It shows the importance of a careful combination of grace and effort in Christian living. Farmers know there is work to be done, and yet are also aware that much lies beyond their control: they can sow the seed, but they can’t make the sun shine. Fruitfulness requires energy on our part along with a level of patience and trust that reaping will follow sowing. We work and God works in us (cf. Philippians 2:12-13).
- It reinforces the significance of whole-life discipleship - that fruitfulness has to do with the lifelong and everyday habits, attitudes, and character of Christians rather than isolated acts in segmented parts of life.
- It also highlights the significance of relationship with others in order to be fruitful.

The outline for an eight-week series looks like this:

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7. Planting for a Harvest
(1 Corinthians 3:1-9) p.15
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(Revelation 22:1-5) p.17

The outline assigns particular biblical passages to each title, though it will be clear in many cases that other passages - or a range of passages - could be drawn on, depending on what might be appropriate in any given church context. These notes focus more on tracing the fruitfulness theme through Scripture and less on providing homiletical pointers. So, this series is likely to require additional thought in terms of appropriate frontline implications arising from the passages, but the above general points and the richness of the theme itself are hopefully sufficient to spark reflections for seasoned preachers.

I. Created to be Fruitful (Genesis 1:24-31 & Colossians 1:1-14)

Paul's references to 'bearing fruit' (Colossians 1:6, 10) tap into a rich seam which runs through Scripture from beginning to end. This sermon could begin in Colossians 1 and move out from there to explore the bigger picture, or it could begin in Genesis 1 and then show how Paul picks up the motif of 'fruitfulness' when writing to the Colossians. Either way, it's helpful to point out the links between the two passages in order to set up the thematic approach to this series.

Genesis 1:24-31 – 'be fruitful and multiply'

- Genesis 1 is structured to emphasise the sixth day as the climax of God's work, with the creation of humanity whose purpose is to extend God's gracious rule over the created order as his representatives (cf. Psalm 8).
- A major point of profound theological significance: fruitfulness begins with God himself, who creates the world and human beings with the capacity to be fruitful.
- God creates land with the capacity to produce plants and trees which bear fruit (1:11-12), he blesses creatures and calls on them to be fruitful and multiply (1:22), and he calls on human beings created in his image to 'be fruitful and increase in number' (1:26-28).
- Fruitfulness requires careful stewardship of resources given to us by God (1:29-30).
- The original mandate has to do with the building of families, the growing of crops and breeding of animals, the tending of the garden to which Adam and Eve are called. Creation requires cultivation. But such cultivation provides the basis of the organisation of society, and includes by extension the development of culture and civilisation - building houses, designing clothes, writing poetry, playing chess - as we represent God's rule over every type of activity, in relationship with others, and in a way that reflects God's own creative hand.
- An increasing number of scholars (such as T. Desmond Alexander, Gregory K. Beale, and John Walton) see the opening chapters of Genesis as portraying God building creation as a 'cosmic temple' in which he sets men and women as his image-bearing priests in order to spread blessing from there to the whole world. Of course, this expectation is shattered when Adam and Eve disobey God and are expelled from the garden sanctuary - which then sets up the rest of the biblical story. What will God do about his plan now?
- The theme of fruitfulness is woven through the rest of Genesis, reiterated to Noah and his sons after the flood (Genesis 8:17; 9:1), to Abraham (17:2, 6), Ishmael (17:20), Isaac (26:22, 24), Jacob (28:3; 35:11), the Hebrews in Egypt (47:27; 48:4). What's at stake here is the numerical growth of the people, but this gets bound up with God's covenant with them, for the sake of blessing all nations.

- When it comes to ‘be fruitful and multiply’, pastoral sensitivity may be required with those who, for whatever reason, have not been able to follow the mandate. In part, some concerns may be addressed by a larger biblical perspective, which is what follows.

Colossians 1:1-14 – ‘bearing fruit and growing’

- As so often in his letters, Paul begins with thanksgiving (1:3-8). Having expressed thankfulness to God for the Colossians’ faith, love and hope, Paul writes that the gospel is ‘bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world’, just as it has been doing among the Colossians themselves (1:6).
- As part of his prayer in 1:9-14, Paul prays that they will be those who are ‘bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God’ (1:10; cf. Philippians 1:11).
- As noted by several commentators, the references to ‘bearing fruit and growing’ (1:6) and ‘bearing fruit... growing’ (1:10) are remarkably similar to the phraseology and thought of Genesis 1:28. Paul appears to be suggesting that the gospel is creating a people who now fulfil the purpose of the creation mandate, a people who are being recreated in the image of God (see Colossians 3:9-10). The gospel is not only bearing fruit and increasing as it spreads around the world (externally), it is also bearing fruit in the Colossians themselves (internally) who heard and embraced the message.
- It’s thus highly likely that Paul sees God’s originally intended design for humanity finally being fulfilled through the power of the gospel, bearing fruit in the lives of men and women!
- Several centuries separate Genesis 1 and Colossians 1, making it worth exploring how the fruitfulness theme is addressed elsewhere in Scripture, which is what this series seeks to do.

2. Blessed in the Land (Leviticus 26:1-13)

This sermon offers several possibilities to explore fruitfulness as it relates to the Old Testament people of God.

Fruitful promises

- The promise of fruitfulness throughout Genesis continues in the book of Exodus, with the multiplication of the Hebrews in Egypt (Exodus 1:7). Then, after the covenant at Sinai, the promises are bound up with the people's obedience to God in the promised land, as God's 'vine' planted there (see Psalm 80:8-11).
- Many passages promise that the land will be fruitful (e.g., Exodus 3:8; Leviticus 25:18-19; Numbers 13:26-27; Deuteronomy 8:7-9).
- Other passages promise that the people themselves - and their animals - will be fruitful (e.g., Deuteronomy 7:13-14; 28:4; 30:9; cf. Psalm 128:3).
- Promises of fruitful land and fruitful loins are combined in Leviticus 26:1-13 (see 26:3-4, 9). Such fruitfulness, though, is understood first in relation to God - in loving him and obeying him - and is also bound up with the relationship between the people themselves, in families and across generations, as well as with the environment, with many of the laws (such as the Jubilee regulations in Leviticus 25) concerned with the survival of family lines.
- Here, as elsewhere, the establishment of the covenant flows out of God's undeserved love for the people (Deuteronomy 7:7-8), but the promise of fruitfulness is conditional on ongoing obedience to the covenant stipulations (Leviticus 26:1-13; Deuteronomy 7:11-15; 11:8-15; 28:2), while disobedience causes a breakdown of the covenant, with curses replacing blessings (Leviticus 26:14-39; Deuteronomy 27:26; 28:15-68). At the very least, this shows that the old covenant people of God were not simply passive recipients of the blessing of fruitfulness, but were called on to keep their side of the covenant agreement.
- Even so, this is not a mechanistic system of reward and punishment so much as an expression of the consequences of staying within and straying from the covenant stipulations which ordered their relationship with God and each other. This is not an early version of 'prosperity theology': the way of obedience does not have to do with earning blessing from God so much as the means of living within the sphere of his ongoing blessing.

Fruitful living

Then, as we see in Psalm 1:3 and elsewhere, bearing fruit becomes a quintessential image of righteous living.

- Psalm 1 plays out a contrast between the ‘righteous’ and the ‘wicked’. The latter are likened to chaff blown away by the wind (1:4), the former to a tree planted by a stream that produces fruit (1:3). The tree is well located, well planted, and well watered. Because of that, it thrives, and bears fruit in season. This might suggest that there are some occasions when it *doesn’t* bear fruit - but it does not wither.
- Jeremiah 17:8 echoes Psalm 1:3 (cf. Numbers 24:6; Job 29:19; Ezekiel 19:10), with a contrast between those who trust in themselves and those who trust in God. Those who are self-sufficient and govern their life without reference to God are compared to a shrub in the desert (17:5-6). By contrast, the person whose confidence is in the Lord is ‘like a tree planted by water’ (17:7-8). Significantly, as in Psalm 1, there is no easy prosperity theology here: ‘heat comes’, but ‘it does not fear’; there may be ‘a year of drought’, but ‘it has no worries’ and ‘never fails to bear fruit’ (17:8).
- See also Psalm 92:12-15 - where the psalmist concludes by saying that ‘the righteous will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow strong like a cedars of Lebanon’ (92:12). Such fruitfulness comes from being ‘planted in the house of the LORD’ (92:13), and leads to productivity in later life too: ‘They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green’ (92:14) - flowing out of a deep and ever-growing relationship with God.



3. Promises to the Nation (Isaiah 5:1-7 & 27:1-6)

On several occasions in the Old Testament, Israel is referred to as a vine or vineyard (e.g., Psalm 80:8-18; Isaiah 5:1-7; Jeremiah 2:21; 11:16-17; 12:10; Ezekiel 15:1-8; Hosea 10:1). The image of fruitfulness is used in contexts which speak about both the judgment and the subsequent restoration of the people.

Promises of judgment

- Again and again in the above passages, the sadness and complaint of the prophets is that Israel as the vine doesn't bear fruit; the consequence in the Old Testament story is that the people suffer judgment and dispersal in exile.

- Isaiah 5:1-7 is perhaps the most well-known of these passages. It's recognised as a carefully-composed poem, which rehearses and interprets the story of salvation history (in the same way that Jesus' use of the vineyard metaphor does in his own time). As a parable or an extended analogy, it's worth reflecting on what it says about God - his power, providence, choosing of Israel, covenant, justice, faithfulness. It's also worth reflecting what it says about the people - their immorality and injustice. Election was a gift not a privilege; Israel was planted to bear fruit, ultimately for the blessing of the nations, but had produced only sour grapes.

Promises of restoration

- Even so, the language of fruitfulness is picked up again in promises of restoration back to the land (Jeremiah 23:3; Ezekiel 17:22-24; 34:27; 36:8, 11, 30; 47:12; Hosea 14:8; Joel 2:22; Amos 9:13-15; Zechariah 8:12).

- Promises of fruitfulness are sometimes associated with the giving of God's Spirit (as in Isaiah 32:15-17), and described as the transformation of a desert into a garden (Isaiah 35:1-10; 41:18-20; 43:19-21).

- Isaiah 27:1-6, in particular, provides a lovely counterpart to 5:1-7, using the same language. In spite of their fruitlessness, God remains committed to his people, and will assume responsibility for the care of the vine, watching over it, watering it, and protecting it against enemies. This is because he has large-scale plans for his vineyard - nothing less than to 'fill all the world with fruit' (27:6)!

4. Responding to the Kingdom (Matthew 21:33-44)

Given the rich Old Testament background, it's perhaps no surprise that Jesus is portrayed in the gospels as using images related to fruit and fruitfulness. In many cases, it's possible to draw lines between Jesus' teaching and Old Testament passages, which might help reinforce the significance of the fruitfulness theme for congregations.

Fruitful trees?

- In his preparation for Jesus' coming, John the Baptist warns the people to produce fruit in keeping with repentance, and that unfruitful trees will be cut down (Matthew 3:8-10; Luke 3:8-9). The contrast between fruit and chaff may remind us of Psalm 1, with the unfruitful threatened with exclusion from the new community.
- Jesus echoes John the Baptist with similar sayings about recognising people by their fruit (Matthew 7:15-20; 12:33; Luke 6:43-45).
- The incident of the cursing of a fig tree (Matthew 21:18-20; Mark 11:12-21) is curious. Mark sandwiches it with the cleansing of the temple incident, which has suggested to some interpreters that we are to interpret the fate of the unfruitful tree as foreshadowing God's judgment on the temple.
- Luke includes a parable about a fig tree being given another chance to bear fruit or risk being cut down (Luke 13:6-9). In the context (13:1-5), the parable reinforces the significance of repentance. Although God waits patiently, giving people every chance to produce fruit, judgment will still come (13:8-9).

Successful harvests?

- Jesus uses the image of a harvest in several parables (e.g., Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43; 25:24-26; Mark 4:26-29; Luke 12:13-21), notably the parable of the sower (Matthew 13:1-23; Mark 4:1-20; Luke 8:4-15), where the seed remains the same, but the fruitfulness of the harvest varies according to the 'reception' of the soil.
- Elsewhere, he talks about the harvest being plentiful but the workers few (Matthew 9:37-38; Luke 10:2), and of sowing and reaping a crop to eternal life (John 4:34-38).

Productive vineyards?

- Some of Jesus' parables include reference to vineyards (Matthew 20:1-16; 21:28-32; Luke 13:6-9).
- Perhaps especially well known is the parable of the vineyard tenants (Matthew 21:33-44; Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-19). It seems to represent a further development on the song of the vineyard in Isaiah 5:1-7, with the vineyard owner now making himself vulnerable in sending his beloved son into a dangerous situation. The parable emphasises not only God's desire for fruit from his people, but his loving patience in waiting for it even in the face of rejection and rebellion.
- Even so, judgment follows unbelief and rejection of his son. Yet, while the tenants will be destroyed, Jesus concludes to his hearers that 'the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit' (21:43). This signals a turning point in God's activity with humanity as faithful Israel is expanded to include Gentiles as well as Jews, with the resolve that this people will bear fruit.



5. Abiding in the Vine (John 15:1-17)

Jesus' statement 'I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener' (John 15:1) is especially evocative against the larger theme of fruitfulness we have seen in the Old Testament and elsewhere in Jesus' teaching.

Restoring Israel's calling

- The upshot of Jesus' declaration and his use of the vine image is that he is now taking up the role God had assigned for Israel. In addition to Isaiah 5:1-7, Psalm 80 is suggestive as background, with Jesus now fulfilling the hope of the 'son' or 'branch' that God has raised up (80:15).
- Brave preachers may want to refer sideways to Paul's discussion in Romans 11:16-24, where he describes how the Gentiles, a wild shoot, have been grafted onto Israel, the cultivated olive tree.
- Interestingly, Jesus does not claim to be the vinedresser, thus assuming the prerogatives of God (as he does elsewhere). Instead, he is the vine, and union with him means participation in the restored end-time people of God who will bear fruit to God's glory.
- Hence, abiding in Jesus is crucial, reinforced by the repeated use of the verb 'remain' (15:4-7, 9-10; cf. 14:17).

Bearing lasting fruit

- Throughout the passage is the expectation that disciples will bear fruit (15:2, 4-5, 8, 16).
- Some of the results of fruitfulness will include: bold prayer (15:7, 16), confident assurance (15:9-10), complete joy (15:11; cf. 16:20-24), and devoted love (15:12, 17; cf. 13:34).
- As elsewhere with the image of fruitfulness, this passage carefully balances the responsibility and effort that is required on our part to bear fruit alongside the work of Jesus and the Father in calling us, making us clean, pruning us, and loving us.
- The passage also includes a remarkable statement from Jesus about disciples being his friends not his servants (15:13-15), flowing out of his laying down his life for them, which puts their relationship with him on a different footing. Our love for one another is modelled on his love for us.

6. Walking in the Spirit (Galatians 5:13-26)

Paul too picks up the language of fruit at various points in his letters, where the original mandate of fruitfulness given at creation finds fulfilment in the worldwide transformation of a people - Gentile as well as Jew - recreated in the image of Christ, a people who bear the fruit of the Spirit as a sign of the new creation.

- Note Romans 7:4 - '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.' Paul goes on to write about being 'released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit' (7:6), a contrast which is explored further in Galatians 5-6.
- As Paul says in Galatians 5, those who *walk* by the Spirit (5:16) and are *led* by the Spirit (5:18), who *live* by the Spirit and *keep in step with* the Spirit (5:25) are no longer under the authority of the Mosaic economy. Nor are they bound to 'gratify the desires of the flesh' (5:16), that way of life marked by alienation from God and each other. Instead, the death and resurrection of Christ and the giving of the Spirit have ushered in a new era - a new creation no less (6:15) - in which the Spirit animates our relationship with God, just as he promised through his prophets.
- The fruit of the Spirit is thus helpfully understood through the lens of the new creation, alluding to promises in the Old Testament that the Spirit would bring about fruitfulness in the new age. This is especially the case in Isaiah 32:15-18 where the fruit the Spirit brings includes godly attributes such as justice, righteousness, confidence in the Lord, quietness, and peace.
- Hence, for Paul, the new creation has been inaugurated by Jesus and is seen in the work of the Spirit producing fruit in believers' lives. In this respect, it's worth noting that six of the nine qualities listed in Galatians 5:22-23 appear in Colossians 3:12-17 in a context where Paul has encouraged them to 'put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its creator' (3:10).
- In different ways, New Testament writers emphasise that God's people have begun to participate in the new creation even before their final physical resurrection at the end of the age. Note also the connection between creation and fruitfulness in James 1:18 - 'He chose to give us birth through the word of truth that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.'

- When it comes to the fruit of the Spirit mentioned here, note the suggestive chapter titles in Philip D. Kenneson, *Life on the Vine: Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit in Christian Community* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1999):

- Cultivating Love in the Midst of Market-Style Exchanges
- Cultivating Joy in the Midst of Manufactured Desire
- Cultivating Peace in the Midst of Fragmentation
- Cultivating Patience in the Midst of Productivity
- Cultivating Kindness in the Midst of Self-Sufficiency
- Cultivating Goodness in the Midst of Self-Help
- Cultivating Faithfulness in the Midst of Impermanence
- Cultivating Gentleness in the Midst of Aggression
- Cultivating Self-Control in the Midst of Addiction

- None of this is easy, of course! As Paul notes, there is conflict and struggle; lasting change does not arrive overnight, and growing fruit can be a slow process. That's why the walking metaphor is so apt (5:16, 25). Walking suggests a regular pattern - ongoing, mundane even - a process which takes place in the everyday where we live and where we work - on the commute, in the home, at the office, in the checkout queue. In all those contexts, it's the consistent, everyday actions that make a difference, as we continue to walk step-by-step in the Spirit while he works in our lives.

- In addition, we do not cultivate the fruit of the Spirit alone. We need each other in order to exercise patience, kindness and gentleness. The change we aspire to is a *communal* process - at the heart of which is love. Paul has already made this clear. Those who have been freed from the law now become 'slaves' of one another through love (5:13). Those who walk in step with the Spirit are empowered by the Spirit to live a life of love (5:22). Such love - far from doing away with the law - actually *sums up* the law (5:14). In fact, the law attains its primary reason for existence in churches of Christ when its members become loving servants of one another.

- In Galatians 6, Paul goes on to write about some of the outworkings of the fruit of the Spirit, one of which is to do 'good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers' (6:10). All this resonates with what Scripture says elsewhere - that while our primary responsibility are those in the family of faith, our 'neighbour' is anyone in need.

7. Planting for a Harvest (1 Corinthians 3:1-9)

We have already seen that Jesus uses the metaphors of sowing and harvesting. New Testament writers follow his lead.

Harvest

- It's possible that references to the word of God 'increasing' or 'spreading' in Acts 6:7 and 12:24 reflect the 'be fruitful and multiply' tradition of Genesis 1:28, also reinterpreted in Colossians 1:6 with reference to the growth of the gospel.
- Paul uses the image of a fruitful harvest to describe his ministry in Romans 1:13, and notes in Philippians 1:22 that remaining alive would allow him further 'fruitful labour'.
- In 1 Corinthians 3:5-9, Paul brings together his ministry in Corinth in which he 'planted the seed', with the ministry of Apollos who 'watered it', with God who 'has been making it grow'. In the immediate context, Paul is tackling the Corinthian obsession with particular 'heroes', but his larger point - that it is God who makes things grow - stands.
- Here, perhaps, is a reminder that the fruitfulness of the harvest depends on many factors: the skill of the gardner, the state of the soil, weather conditions. And growth may be seasonal. Plus, different practices of cultivation are involved - tilling, planting, weeding, fertilising, pruning, irrigating, harvesting - and no one person necessarily does them all. Some plant, others water, while others reap what was sown.
- It would be easy in a season of sowing to be discouraged by the lack of apparent fruit. But farmers need to be patient and exercise trust (Mark 4:26-29; James 5:7-8).

Firstfruits

- Deuteronomy 26 describes a simple ceremony at harvest time when a farmer would bring the firstfruits of his harvest to God at the tabernacle - offering the beginning and the best of the harvest.
- In Romans 8:23, Paul says that *God* has given *us* the firstfruits of the Spirit, a taste of the best part of the fulness God has planned for the future. It's a shift from God being the recipient to God being the giver. God gives *us* the firstfruits, gives us the Spirit as the downpayment of our full adoption, as Paul goes on to say. For Paul, there is an 'already' and a 'not yet' aspect to Christian experience. The new age has broken into the present age, so that we enjoy 'the firstfruits of the Spirit' while awaiting the full harvest. In that sense, 'firstfruits' and 'harvest'

become metaphors for describing Christian experience in the world in the time leading up to the end.

- Jesus' resurrection from the dead is also described as the 'firstfruits' of our resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:20, 23), encouraging us to see how resurrection hope flows back into our lives now, shaping how we think, speak, and live - as we embody God's all-encompassing salvation in the here and now while waiting for our own resurrected body.



8. Healing for the Nations (Revelation 22:1-5)

As we pray and work to see fruit in the spread of the gospel, and as we abide in the vine bearing fruit to the glory of God, and as we seek to walk in step with the Spirit who does his new creation work in and through the church, we look forward to the new Jerusalem where trees will bear fruit for the healing of the nations.

- Several major biblical themes come to their fruition (no pun intended) in Revelation 21-22 - new Jerusalem, new temple, new covenant, new people, new creation - all of which centre on Christ. Part of the total package is the reappearance in the biblical story - on the very last page - of the tree of life (22:2, 14, 19; cf. 2:7).
- The first appearance of the tree of life in Scripture is Genesis 2:9. Its location at the centre of the Garden of Eden is significant, and its name suggests that it produces fruit that gives immortality, which seems to be confirmed by Genesis 3:22-24.
- In keeping with Eden being portrayed as a garden sanctuary, the tree of life appears to have been represented in the tabernacle and temple by the Menorah - a golden candelabrum with branches, buds and almond flowers (Exodus 25:31-40; 37:17-24), placed in close proximity to the holy of holies.
- Wisdom is equated with the tree of life in Proverbs 3:18 (cf. 11:30; 13:12; 15:4), echoing the early chapters of Genesis, suggesting wisdom is the source and sustainer of long life (3:16), bringing peace (*shalom*, 3:17). The implication is that to acquire wisdom is to be blessed in an analogous way to what Adam and Eve would have experienced had they eaten of the tree of life.
- Fruit bearing emerges as a powerful motif towards the end of Ezekiel in promises of restoration to the people of God, where the mountains of Israel are promised fruitfulness (36:8-11), and then explicitly compared with Eden (36:28-35). Trees are also a part of his vision of the restored end-time temple (41:18-26). Towards the end of the vision, he sees a river that flows from the place of sacrifice, bringing renewal to the whole land, which causes 'trees for food' to grow on both banks, whose 'fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing' (47:12).
- Like Ezekiel, John too sees an Eden-like 'river of the water of life' proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb (Revelation 22:1), with the tree of life on both sides 'bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month' (22:3). Where humans were formerly denied access to the tree of life, now John's vision includes it, describes how it produces twelve kinds of fruit every month which renew those who eat it. The picture John paints - of free access to life and vitality - is significant in a world where people struggle to overcome disease and death.

- An ecological dimension is hinted at in the phrase ‘no longer will there be any curse’ (22:3), reflecting the cursing of the ground in Genesis 3:17-18. Now the natural order has been amazingly transformed, with the ancient promises of restoration (e.g., Amos 9:13-15; Isaiah 30:23-25; Jeremiah 31:12; Joel 3:18) finding their ultimate fulfilment not in the return of Israel from exile but in the transformation of the cosmos to be a place where God and people can truly dwell together.
- The international dimension is also significant. The leaves are ‘for the healing of the nations’ (22:2), already anticipated in 21:24 and 26. Citizens of the new earth are drawn from all nations in fulfilment of the promise to Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3; 15:5; 17:4-6; 22:16-18), itself reflecting the original blessing of fruitfulness on humanity right back at creation.



For more materials on fruitfulness visit www.licc.org.uk/fruitfulness

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