

We live in a day when the world is visited by disaster after disaster. Some of these are natural happenings such as floods, fires, earthquakes, and famines. Others are those of wars which generally bring horrifying devastation to tribes, clans and people. With social, medical, and educational aid there has never been a time when so much has been supplied, even though it is so often inadequate.

The development of resources now has to be on a gigantic scale. Come a national catastrophe and aid teams are flown in and set to work. Where did this idea of help originate? It is not too much to say that it is built into the human race, by creation, to share mutually in times of need. It is not too much, also, to say that when Man chose to be self-centred the miseries of the world began and have continued.

This little book has been written on the thesis that everything in the world must be self-giving so that it can be perpetuated and enjoy its being in creation. It is, then, wonderful that the Creator was so filled with love that He withheld not His only Son but sent him to become part of the world, and teach us the joy of giving, 'Though he were rich, yet for our sakes he became poor, that we, through his poverty might become rich'. That is why a great mystery becomes known to us when we join in the experience of being fruitful and giving out of such fruitfulness.

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Comprehending

Fruitfulness of God



Geoffrey C Bingham

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Comprehending Fruitfulness to God

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Foreword to the 'Comprehending Books'

For over twenty-five years New Creation Teaching Ministry (NCTM) has been developing Christian Resources, and by means of its Publishing Unit—New Creation Publications Incorporated (NCPI)—has brought these to the general public and is making them further available on the Internet. NCPI distributes books, booklets, other printed study materials, audio and video cassettes, some music CDs and is forming CD-ROMs. All of these are for use by pastors, theologians and other persons. NCPI also has an Imprint named Troubadour Press. By means of NCPI and Troubadour Press, we seek to cover Bible teaching, Bible commentaries, theology, history, personal counselling and certain devotional materials. It also publishes useful fiction and non-fiction volumes, including poetry and hymn books. In addition, it seeks out valuable out of print theological books and republishes them.

Many of our NCPI publications are quite substantial and deal with a wide variety of subjects. In some cases certain readers find they cannot take on board books designed to deal thoughtfully and in detail with their subjects or topics. These

readers would like smaller books or booklets which would give them the essence of the subjects they are seeking to understand. It is obvious that often a reader may find a substantial book too much to take in, and may even lose the essence of its subject. It is a pleasant fact that many of our booklets are in demand and are sufficient to inform their readers on a particular subject. One consideration, of course, is that our booklets are less expensive than those which deal in detail with their particular theme, though none of our books is really expensive.

Here, at NCTM–NCPI, we pondered the whole matter and came up with the idea that we would develop what we have called ‘The Comprehending Series’. These booklets would be in a format easy to handle, to read and to comprehend. By ‘comprehend’ we mean each title would deal with its subject so that it would be easy to understand. We decided that it should still have to have substance, and would not be designed for laziness in reading, or be superficial in its material. We had hoped the general public and those with minds for biblical truth would enjoy the Series and not find the books difficult to comprehend. We also hoped that thoughtful students and scholars would find them quite useful. We decided that the subjects should be those which constantly come up in conversation, confront us often in life, and would be helpful in gaining knowledge and wisdom.

We thought it would be good to have a regular format and a cover by which we could quickly recognise the Series. Of course, we send out these

slim volumes with a certain heart-trepidation. Doubtless some of them will be thought to be too simple, and others to be too difficult, but on the whole we feel they will fulfil a felt need and with a prayer and a tremor or two we send them out to the public. It could be that you might come to welcome and appreciate them. We hope so.

Geoffrey Bingham
General Editor
NCPI, 2000

Foreword

'Comprehending Fruitfulness' might seem to be a minor exercise. Whilst we recognise it is a good exercise to have, yet we might miss the important fact that fruitfulness is what we are created for; it is what we are about as being human in God's world.

Today it has become customary to think that to put ourselves first is the norm of human living. Actually it is a debased form of living. Christ did not come to be a human being to show some ideal we might follow, one such as he seemed to set forth. That is, he did not teach us to seek to be a source of life for others by our fruitfulness, as though it were a fine ideal. He showed us that being fruitful is the only way of truly living. Love does not seek after its own, but seeks blessing and enrichment for others. In doing so, this love is not being idealistic but normal. To be self-centred is selfish. To bear fruit for others—which is what every tree and vine does—is to be normal.

Having come to this understanding over many years, and having taught it to others and having seen the outcome of this confrontation of being truly human, I am convinced that this little book could be a source of enrichment to those who will read it. I trust many will read it and be taken up

into the sphere of action which is the most delightful of all—fruitbearing!

Geoffrey Bingham
August, 2000

Comprehending Fruitfulness to God

INTRODUCTION: THE SUBJECT OF FRUITFULNESS

Fruitfulness is a subject and theme which runs through from Genesis chapter 1 to Revelation chapter 22. It is not often treated except in expounding particular passages such as John 15:1–16 and Galatians 5:22–23. Abiding in the vine—which is Christ—and bearing fruit is a well known picture of fruitfulness, and Galatians 5:22–23—on the fruit of the Holy Spirit—is also often expounded; yet fruitfulness, and in particular bearing fruit to God, is a profound truth which needs to be set before us all. It is possible that much latent anxiety and guilt come from an almost unconscious sense that one is not bearing fruit in this life. Since, too, the Scriptures also warn us against bearing fruit to ourselves, that anxiety is increased. The rich assurance of our fellowship with God which we desire comes mainly when we are just doing His will, in which case we will certainly be bearing fruit for Him.

FRUITFULNESS IN THE BEGINNING

The picture we have in Genesis chapters 1 and 2 is of greater fruitfulness. When God creates, the account of that creation in Genesis 1 talks of living creatures that swarm, and God blessed the creation of animals and said, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth'. Man is told to 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth'. In Eden the trees are said to be 'good for food, and pleasant to the eyes'. The river which begins in Eden not only waters Paradise but flows out to water the whole world. From that point onwards, Man's fruitfulness and the fruitfulness of creation is a great theme. The idea of large families speaks of the notion of fruitfulness which has been in the mind of the human race. Such notions are still found in many races and places. Indeed, so many Psalms are occupied with the thought of the abundance that God brings to the earth. God blesses and the earth yields bountifully. God curses and the blessings of fruitfulness fade away and sterility and barrenness appear. It is so of the true essence of all creation to be fruitful that when a person lacks fruitfulness incipient guilt sets in, the conscience is clouded, the spirit dulled and damaged.

When we look at the subject of God's glory we see in it the vast resources not only for physical fruitfulness, but for more fruitfulness. In John 15:7-8 Jesus told his disciples, 'If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you. By this my

Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples.' God creates Man in His own image and this means he must be like God in moral goodness such as love, holiness, righteousness and truth. The relational fullness of such a person is something wonderful to see and to experience. All God's human creatures have these things built into their creation—however they may use or refuse to use them in the service of God and creation. Proverbs 4:23 states, 'Keep your heart with all vigilance; for from it flow the springs of life'. Humans who use these beautiful issues are like fountains flowing forth wonderful things which bring fruitfulness in human society, and help to enrich others in fruitfulness. Those who are affected by sin and evil and the curse are like 'a muddied fountain or a polluted stream'. Their sterility and barrenness makes them to be dreary and unattractive creatures. They do not correspond with their true, original humanity which derived from God as 'the Fountain of living waters' and who waters the whole earth with His 'River of God'—whom we call 'the Holy Spirit'.

BRINGING FORTH FRUIT UNTO ONESELF

In Romans 7:4 Paul talks of us being crucified with Christ so that the outcome will be 'bearing fruit for God'. This is a lovely statement and we can visualise it in wonderful ways. As against bearing fruit for God there is bearing fruit for oneself. Paul speaks in 2 Timothy 3:1-5 of a fierce self love,

a horrible self-addiction in which one brings forth fruit unto oneself. We might say that fruit borne is with a view to one consuming it—to the ignoring of a world of need:

But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of stress. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, inhuman, implacable, slanderers, profligates, fierce, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding the form of religion but denying the power of it. Avoid such people.

In every society we have our great magnates, those who have heaped up treasures for themselves. Jesus described such as, 'he who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich towards God'. 'Rich towards God' is a glorious prospect, dizzying to contemplate. The one who is rich towards himself will hear only the word, 'Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be?' (Luke 12:20, AV). Such is the barrenness of the self-producing trees of humanity.

If we look at what we might call extreme addiction to, and dependence upon producing fruit for oneself, then we must see that this is not only in the obvious carnal exercises of human beings, but exists in more subtle, but no less deadly forms of spiritual pride. We can easily criticise the Pharisee for his spiritual pride, and not realise the same elements in ourselves, though they may take different forms. Milton's statement:

Fame is the spur that the clear spirit doth raise
(That last infirmity of noble mind)
To scorn delights, and live laborious days⁶

tells us that we will go to any length to be praised. This fruit is the bitter fruit of the wild grape. We must keep seeing there is fruit only in simple abiding and sincere obedience, and that it is God's fruit borne by grace through us.

DESTROYING THE FRUIT OF GOD

In Galatians 5:19–23 Paul contrasts the *works* of the flesh, and the *fruit* of the Spirit. All self-wrought, self-supplying fruitage is sterile. Only the fruit (harvest) of the Spirit will endure since it is of moral and spiritual nature. Every gift given by God must be prized. Humanity is prized by God and He goes out to make it fruitful. Jesus taught that if God saw every sparrow that fell to the earth and died, then how much more did He value Man? At creation Man was crowned with honour and glory and everything was put under his feet. He was to be fruitful and multiply.

When Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, met Mary the pregnant mother of Jesus she exclaimed, 'Blessed is the fruit of thy womb!' because it was the Seed of woman which was to destroy the serpent—'that ancient serpent the devil'—as God had told the serpent in Eden. In her

⁶ John Milton, 'Lycidas', *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, Oxford Uni. Pr., Oxford, 1989, p. 343.

salutation she said, 'Blessed is the fruit of thy womb!' A woman is different from a man and her prime secret is that she produces fruit from her body. Her life is first wrapped around that child within her—that abides in her—and then occupies all her life.

The splendid picture in Revelation chapter 12 of the woman clothed with the sun and the moon and the stars, about to bring forth her man-child, is a picture of God's sovereignty in the incarnation of the Son: a picture of womanly fruitfulness in the face of fierce odds. At the same time there is a picture of the Red Dragon who goes about to destroy her child because the woman has ever been a threat to it. In particular there is the slaughter of the innocent children under the regime of Herod. History, sadly enough, shows the savagery of invading hordes which destroy the children of hated enemies. Satan is the implacable enemy of the 'fruit of the woman'.

Today the 'fruit of the womb' so often does not come to ripeness—to be born. Some thirty million foetuses are aborted in the world every year, and most of them in the interests of the women who do not want children, but want to go on their way in the pleasures they envisage will give them delight in life—this without taking up womanly responsibilities. This is the literal destruction of fruit which could be born and then ripen to God's glory in its action of life—fruitfulness denied to it by cruel destruction.

More even to the point than these dreadful assaults on the human womb are those of attacks

on the vast multitude born of the Spirit, the spiritual children of the Eve of the Second Adam. This implacable enmity of Satan and his hosts is felt every day in the camp of God. So would the rapacious hunger of the Evil One seek to destroy and cannibalise the true children of God. Yet Edenic power works throughout the world, assuring us that the ultimate fruitage will accrue to the glory of God, in the emancipation of the nations from barrenness so that they can bring their glory into the ultimate Eden.

CHRIST AND FRUITFULNESS

Christ was obviously one who lived a most fruitful life. As touching moral goodness and its fruits there was never a human being who lived as he did. Godly fruits in the Scriptures are good works a person does. In Psalm 1 the man who meditates on the law of God lives aright and is like a tree which is richly fruitful. So was Christ a good tree—even, we assume, 'the very Tree of Life'. His love towards humanity resulted in so many good works towards humanity, such as miracles, healings, deliverance from dark and demonic powers and the tyranny of an evil conscience. All such works were a preparation for the death of the Cross, which he described as a seed of wheat falling into the darkness of the ground and resulting in 'much fruit'. On that Cross he bore our griefs and carried our sorrows. The works of the Cross are many and Isaiah 53:11 describes the outcome,

'he [the Suffering Servant] shall see the fruit of the travail of his soul and be satisfied'. These powerful words describe a universal fruitfulness arising from his universal suffering in Gethsemane and on the Cross. If we rightly understand this statement then we know that true fruitfulness arises from nowhere but the Cross.

Christ told stories about fruitfulness and unfruitfulness. It seems the idea of fruitfulness was constantly in his mind. Doubtless he desired us to share in fruitfulness as the very meaning of life. His parable of the sower sowing seed—and the failure of some soils to produce fruitfulness, and a soil which was most fruitful—keep the ideas of barrenness and fruitfulness before us. The uselessness of barren soil and invading weeds, and the threat to useful fruitfulness are stressed in another parable, the one called 'the Barren Fig Tree'. He spoke of a fig tree with which a farmer persisted even though it did not bring forth fruit. However, if it persisted in remaining barren he would root it up. He spoke of it 'cumbering the ground', that is, taking up an area which could otherwise be fruitful. Christ also spoke of men being given talents to use in their Master's service. One refused to use it for that purpose and he was greatly punished. Christ himself cursed the fig tree which gave outward promise of fruitfulness but remained deceptively barren. He said this tree represented Israel at that time—the time of his visitation. Jerusalem was very religious but it was barren.



Most of all Christ spoke about fruitfulness in the 15 chapter of John's Gospel:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already made clean by the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned.

If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide; so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you (vv. 1-16).

This chapter is filled with wonderful things, spoken as it was on the night before his betrayal

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by Judas. We are told in John 13:1, 'Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end'. These beautiful words that tell of his love now have their full expression in the passage we have selected for studying. It was really the first time in all his ministry that Jesus had spoken largely of love, and in particular his love for them. Previously on that night he had spoken about them loving one another, 'A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another' (John 13:34). In John 15:12 he spoke of the same thing—but first he was concerned with the fruitfulness of love.

He told them he was the True Vine. Their minds would have gone back to Isaiah chapter 5 where Israel was figured as God's vine:

Let me sing for my beloved
a love song concerning his vineyard:
My beloved had a vineyard
on a very fertile hill.
He digged it and cleared it of stones,
and planted it with choice vines;
he built a watchtower in the midst of it,
and hewed out a wine vat in it;
and he looked for it to yield grapes,
but it yielded wild grapes.
And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem
and men of Judah,
judge, I pray you, between me
and my vineyard.
What more was there to do for my vineyard,

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that I have not done in it?
When I looked for it to yield grapes,
why did it yield wild grapes?
And now I will tell you
what I will do to my vineyard.
I will remove its hedge,
and it shall be devoured;
I will break down its wall,
and it shall be trampled down.
I will make it a waste;
it shall not be pruned or hoed,
and briars and thorns shall grow up;
I will also command the clouds
that they rain no rain upon it.

God had spent much time and care on this vineyard, but although a domesticated vine, it had not brought forth domesticated fruit, but the bitter fruit of the wild vine. Here Jesus was saying that he was the True Vine, and that his Father cared for what fruit he bore. Indeed the Father was the True Vintner. As such the Father would not allow an unfruitful branch to remain on the vine, and what was fruitful he would care for in order that it should bring forth more fruit. What was unfruitful would be burned as rubbish. A salutary warning.

There was a great warning that night in the midst of the disciples. Judas had gone out to betray Jesus and this act declared him to be an unfruitful branch. If Judas had really received the sap of Jesus he would have been a fruitful branch. As it was he was to perish. So of all unfruitful vines. The way, then, to be fruitful is for a branch to be eager about its participation in Jesus, and this

would be in the relationship of love. Human beings have intelligence where vines simply have creative sense. How often we are astonished at what a plant, shrub or tree can suddenly produce, as it were, of its own will.

To abide in the True Vine would be to abide in love, for this is the theme of the passage. It is to believe in and receive his love: it is to be in full union with the productive Vine. Jesus, for his part, was always abiding in his Father's love, and if the disciples were to abide in him then they would abide in his love, the source of true fruitfulness. Abiding means 'to rest', 'to remain', 'to dwell'. We should keep this in mind, for after the fruitfulness of Calvary the disciples were always to be *in* Jesus, and so bring forth 'much fruit'.

To live in Christ's love would be also to love one another. The world would see they belonged to Jesus by the love they had for one another. This would be true discipleship. At this point Jesus introduced what we may think to be a new idea, namely that he was their friend and they his friends. It is not as commonplace as it may appear on the first reading. Two men in the Old Testament were said to be the friends of God, namely Abraham and Moses. Jesus said one of the marks of friendship is that there is nothing concealed between friends. God has once said, 'Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?' On this basis God had told him what he was about to do. It is axiomatic that God would always tell humanity what He was about by sending His prophets to tell His intentions. Here, in John 15:15

Jesus says, 'No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you'.

Jesus then revealed to the disciples his intention for them, what it was, what it had always been in his mind, namely:

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide; so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. This I command you, to love one another (John 15:16-17).

Jesus showed them something which would always stand by them. Firstly, they had not made the choice to be his disciples. He had made that choice. Secondly, his intention was that they should bear fruit. Thirdly, he had determined that their fruit should always remain, and not be lost. Fourthly—and quite importantly—their prayers would always be answered when they were fruitful, and when they therefore asked their petition of the Father in the name of Jesus. It is a thought parallel to what Jesus had told them in 15:7-8:

If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples.

Here we gain a valuable insight and principle that in the midst of fruit bearing there is fruitful prayer from abiding in Christ.

These are remarkable intentions on Jesus' part. They assure the disciples of the sovereign call of God and relieve them of having to bear fruit by their own efforts. They assure them that they will be fruitful, and—wonderfully enough!—that their fruit would forever remain.



Their comprehension of fruitfulness should be ours who are in Christ. If we ask, 'What is fruitfulness?' then the answer is working in every department of our life to love and act in love towards those outside of us. On the one hand it is to use every faculty, power and talent God has given so that others may benefit. This will mean moral living and moral action which is other-person centred. It will also come to mean loving one's enemies even in the midst of their opposition and persecution. The measure of the rightness of all God's creation is fruitfulness. The measure of its failure is its unfruitfulness. God's entire creation has been called to fruitfulness. The measure of Christ's 'rightness' is the measure of his fullness—his fruitfulness. He had suffered much in order to bring forth fruit and, as we saw, 'He shall see the fruit of the travail of his soul and be satisfied'. The immensity and fullness of his fruitfulness is such that we cannot compute it. His eternal satisfaction lies in the realities of his incarnation, his death, burial, resurrection and ascension and his continuous session at the right hand of God. By these he had rescued humanity from its

Adamic fruitlessness, from the curse of infertility and death, and brought his elect into a place of fecundity and beauty. The new abundance of fruit in a life makes it worthwhile. The issues that flow from the regenerated human heart help to supply a new and genuine productivity in the stream of humanity.

At this point we should stop and examine ourselves or, rather, be examined by the word of God. Are we, indeed, fruitful, or are we barren? Are we busy with many 'works' which, for all their doing, are not fruits but human workings? Are we depending upon the 'sap' of the Vine or are we—in variance with the Vine—seeking to produce that which will prove only to be the bitter product of an untamed spirit, a wild 'fruit' which is no true fruit?

Another way of looking at ourselves is to see the wonder of abiding in Christ and becoming truly fertile and fruitful. This is, of course, by abiding in Christ—abiding in his love. This is the normal way of a believer's life. Paul speaks of 'the inexhaustible riches of Christ', saying that in him 'are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge'. Christ, as the Source in whom we abide, is sufficient for the bearing of full fruitage in each life that rests and remains in him.

Let us also see that, whilst Eden was the true place of fruitfulness, Adam was expected to expand and extend Eden until it covered all the earth and everything would be fruitfulness. In spite of Man's failure the River of God has ever been flowing out into all the earth and watering it.

By 'watering it' we mean supplying the life that can be turned to fruitfulness, whether biologically or in the moral-spiritual sense. The Holy Spirit has ever been present in the whole creation, as Christ the Creator-Son of God has ever created and sustained the universe. The oversight of the Father 'who is above all, and through all and in all' has ever functioned in all creation. The present, amazing, physical fruitfulness of creation is due to the grace and generosity of God. Likewise, where moral-spiritual fruits are found in the goodness exercised by humanity, God will be found to be the Source of that powerful productivity. It will be shown in the richness of human relationships, unity and fellowship. It will be practically outworked in the sharing of humanity's griefs and sorrows and the alleviation of its pains.

FRUITFULNESS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

We have already spoken of the fruitfulness of Christ, and indicated what he himself had taught regarding fruitfulness. He also taught regarding fruitlessness which would meet with punishment. He himself knew his fruitfulness depended upon his abiding in the Father, which is another way of saying that abiding is obedience from the heart. God energises those who depend upon Him to fulfil their ministries, their true purpose in life. He went through the way of suffering to effect a fruitfulness which would remain for ever.

The great outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost immediately brought a harvest of fruitfulness,

not only in the matter of the thousands who responded, but also in their subsequent fruit of love in caring for the widows, the orphans and the poor, a fruitfulness which has persisted in many wonderful ways up to this very day. This is the rich harvest of love which we see throughout the New Testament, especially from Pentecost onwards. So the church at Antioch sent relief to the church at Jerusalem in a time of need and then of famine. So Paul urged converts to think of the poor and hungry in Jerusalem, and they responded with a special offertory. So John could chide those who have this world's goods and have a cold heart towards those in dire need. Such stinginess was alien to the gospel of shared blessings.

The New Testament writers first record Christ's witness to fruitfulness, and then speak of the fruitfulness of Christ's people. Paul is especially helpful in this matter. He says clearly in Romans 7:4:

Likewise, my brethren, you have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God.

'Fruit for God' is an important phrase, and we ought to keep it in mind. He is contrasting this kind of fruit with another, of which he speaks in the next verse:

While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death.

This is also a powerful statement, telling us that in our Adamic state we not only did not bear fruit for God, but we also bore unwholesome fruit for death, that is, fruit which would lead to death. The statement is frightening. We have a further mention of this in Galatians 5:19–21:

Now the works of the flesh are plain: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.

Elsewhere Paul speaks of ‘the unfruitful works of darkness’ (Eph. 5:11).

What Paul was teaching was that Christ’s work of the death of the Cross and his following work of the Resurrection become immediately affective for the person who has been baptised into Christ. By their participation in this work of the Cross and the Resurrection the believer is freed from the power of sin and moral–spiritual barrenness, and is liberated into a new life to ‘bring forth fruit for God’. That fruit he insists ‘is found in all that is good and right and true’ for it is ‘the fruit of light’ (Eph. 5:7–11). In Galatians 5:16–26 he contrasts walking in the Spirit with walking in the flesh. Walking in the Spirit is the way of dependence upon God, and the way of the flesh is the way of depending upon oneself. The way of the flesh produces the works of the flesh which are deadly: ‘Now the works of the flesh are plain . . . I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do

such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.’ We notice that the flesh does not produce *fruits* but *works*, and they are, to say the least, quite dreadful. Who would want to end a life having produced only the *works* of the flesh? The dreariness of such a life, infertile and futile, calls for sorrowing over a wasted life that could have been so rich and dynamic had the will of the person submitted to Christ and lived and remained in him.

By way of contrast, the way of the Spirit produces the fruit of true moral–spiritual living:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law (Gal. 5:22–23).

We can see here that where Christ is the Source—as in John 15:1–16—so here the Holy Spirit is the Source as he brings the fruits of Christ to the believer. The fruit of the Vine would be exactly the same as the fruit of the Spirit.⁷

Paul, himself, was always seeking to be fruitful. In the first chapter of the Epistle to the Romans he tells his readers that he would like to ‘impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you’. He then goes on to pray that ‘I might reap some spiritual harvest among you’. Not only does he teach on fruitfulness in this letter but he says when he comes he will come ‘in the fullness of the blessing . . . of Christ’, that is, he will be fruitful towards them. He teaches the Corinthian church to be

⁷ For a full treatment of the fruit of the Spirit see my book *The Spirit’s Harvest* (NCPI, Blackwood, 1987).

fruitful in their giving; 2 Corinthians chapters 8 and 9 are a classic on this. He speaks of Christ who was rich yet became poor that they might become rich. He closes his discourse in chapter 9 with a wonderful section in verses 10–15:

He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your resources and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for great generosity, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God; for the rendering of this service not only supplies the wants of the saints but also overflows in many thanksgivings to God. Under the test of this service, you will glorify God by your obedience in acknowledging the gospel of Christ, and by the generosity of your contribution for them and for all others; while they long for you and pray for you, because of the surpassing grace of God in you. Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!

Paul is aware of the love of his friends who support him in prayer, and in many cases by their gifts. He says to those at Philippi, 'Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit which increases to your credit'.

Of course, the great fruit which is in the eyes of all the people of God is the final harvest of human beings at the end of the age:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb!' And all the angels stood round the

throne and round the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, 'Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen.'

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, 'Who are these, clothed in white robes, and whence have they come?' I said to him, 'Sir, you know.' And he said to me, 'These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb' (Rev. 7:9–12).

This is the great harvest of which Jesus spoke in the Gospels. We do not need to go back to all those accounts but simply see that all this—the fruit of the travail of his soul—will not only be the 'great multitude such that no man can number' of the redeemed, but all the great elements of the Telos, the final climax. These are the Marriage of the Bride and the Lamb, the Holy City with its wave upon wave of the nations entering it, the marvellous Paradise with its River of God and its Tree of Life on both sides of the City, and its Temple which can only be God and the Lamb, and the glorious Light which brightens all eternity. Everything will be in abundance, and all of it the fruit of love and love's suffering. All these are the ultimate 'fruit of the travail of his soul'.

THE WAY OF FRUITFULNESS AND BEING IN IT

We will have gathered in our little book that our fruitfulness depends on God's blessings upon us.

Comprehending Fruitfulness to God

We can be fruitful to others with the substance which God has given to us. Likewise moral and spiritual poverty arise from the curse, or the deprivation of natural blessing, when we set our course on other things than God Himself. If we abide in idols and not in God, if we produce the sterile works of the flesh instead of the living fruit of the Spirit, then we miss Man's true vocation which is to be the image of God in generosity. Honouring God with gratitude for His blessings is the heart of worship. Thus in worship we have union with God, being glad to use the gifts He has given in service to both God and Man. Love so loves that it gives from what it has received and this may be described as the active fruitfulness of a person.

In the early church there was a ministry called *paraclesis* or exhortation. Not only would pastors and elders exhort the flock but all members of the church would exhort one another. It is helpful to know that it is by motivation that exhortation is applied. Thus in Romans 12:1, 'I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God'; 1 Corinthians 1:10, 'by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ'; and 2 Corinthians 10:1, 'by the meekness and gentleness of Christ'. In Philippians 2:1–4 there is really a long and powerful exhortation. We note the basis of it:

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any incentive of love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind (vv. 1–2).

Comprehending Fruitfulness to God

In verses 2 and 3 Paul directly exhorts Euodia and Syntyche to agree, and on the basis of their former ministry with him. Also he exhorts help for these women from his brethren:

I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. And I ask you also, true yokefellow, help these women, for they have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

In Philemon 8–10 Paul could command Philemon but he prefers to appeal to him on Onesimus' behalf, 'I appeal to you for my child . . .'

In Romans 13:11 is an exhortation which has its motivation for obedience built into it:

Besides this you know what hour it is, how it is full time now for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed.

Here the *eschaton* is the powerful context, and the coming of the concluding Telos (climax) is in view. Thus moral exhortation and moral response is truly powerful. This rather long explanation of *paraclesis* is given because at the end of this examination of fruitfulness there must also come an exhortation—and that exhortation is to be fruitful. No one may ever have exhorted us to be fruitful. This may be because the believer in Christ is expected, naturally and without exhortation, to do so. Coming under 'the instruction of grace' (see Titus 2:11–14) we should, without thinking about it, become fruitful. This would be because we abide in Christ, we walk in the way of the Spirit,

and we desire to see our lives bear fruit. Such would need no exhortation.

On the other hand, in the New Testament we find that there are Christians who are stunted in their spiritual comprehension and growth. Paul calls them 'carnal' and the writer of Hebrews calls them 'dull of hearing'. Paul also speaks of some who, in the day of the final judgment, have no fruit to show for their long living as Christians. He says, 'These will be saved as by fire', that is, they will have nothing to show for a life lived amongst humanity. When we look above at those who are exhorted we see that often they are almost oblivious of the true dynamics of a fruitful life. Yes: we need to exhort them—as also ourselves—so that we be not barren.

In 2 Peter 1:3–11 we have fine, hortatory passages:

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, that through these you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of passion, and become partakers of the divine nature. For this very reason make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. *For if these things are yours and abound, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.* For whoever lacks these things is blind and short sighted and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins. Therefore,

brethren, be the more zealous to confirm your call and election, for if you do this you will never fall; so there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The Source and Way of Fruitfulness

Another way of encouraging one another is to see that having been transformed by the gospel brought to us through the Spirit, we should feel eagerness to become fruitful, in which case we can understand the following principles: (i) Christ was fruitful because he remained—dwelled—in his Father (John 15:10); (ii) that out of this indwelling Christ obeyed his Father's commandments—fruitfulness, then, comes from obedience; and (iii) he saw that 'unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies it brings forth much fruit'. This 'dying' is the way of the Cross and of suffering. Fruitfulness is always in the context of suffering.

When we see ourselves living in these principles then fruitful life is not a 'how-to-live' way. It *is* the way as it really is. The Spirit of God will not only reveal this truth to us but also will enable us to walk in this way: the way of abiding and of obedience. In John 15:1–17, when Jesus taught his disciples the principle of abiding in him, he then went on to say that they would face a hostile world which would hate them and seek to destroy them. Even so, the suffering which would come to them could only increase their fruitfulness. Of course no one would enter and go through such

suffering without living in the love of God. In 2 Corinthians 4:7–18 Paul speaks about the same suffering and says that it is because Christians ‘carry about in their bodies the dying of the Lord Jesus’ which antagonises those who see this witness. He encourages battered and beaten Christians to persist and concludes:

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, because we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal (vv. 16–18).

To abide in Christ is to suffer. None can suffer outside this abiding for it is beyond our own innate capacity. We must be in ‘the fellowship of his sufferings’. There is no true suffering apart from him.

The Practical Principle of Abiding

It is necessary for us to spend a few more thoughts on the principle of abiding. The verb in John 15 ‘to abide’, can also be translated ‘to remain’, ‘to dwell’, or ‘to inhabit’. It is always a matter of choice, a continuing decision to do the will of God. In John 10:30 Jesus claims, ‘I and the Father are one’. In 10:38 he says that the works he does show that he is in the Father, that is, he abides in Him:

But if I do them [the works], even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and

understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.

In John 17 he amplifies this relationship, saying in verses 20–22:

I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one.

LET THERE BE NO PRIDE IN FRUITFULNESS

Fruitfulness is for joy. It is the joy born of the proper use of the gifts, talents and blessing of God given to us. Looking back over this little book we see that life is dry, dreary and useless when we use the gifts given to us only for ourselves. To be only self-concerned and self-centred is unsatisfactory. To mark our life out to its end with ourselves as our focus may bring a certain sterile satisfaction, but the whole being of a person cannot be stretched out in the beautiful experience of love for others. Fruit is to be produced for the eating of it by others. A tree does not consume itself, for if there were a tree that could do this it would be self-cannibalising.

It is our participation in the ever Self-giving God which realises in us what it is to live, to be a child of God, a member of Christ and a participator in the Kingdom of heaven. If, at any time, we become

proud of what we accomplish, then it is to be hoped that what we have said above will confront us with our foolish boasting. What fruit we bear by resting in the Vine and being obedient to it will be accounted for by Christ who, himself, bears fruit on our branches. If we walk in the Spirit, then the wonderful fruit we bear will be of the Spirit himself. We are by creation dependent creatures, dependent ever on God for what we do and what we accomplish. It is God in us who energises us to 'do and to will of his good pleasure'. It is our joy to go along with His will—for the outcome of His will is unspeakable joy.

We have constant warnings not to be proud of what we think we accomplished when we accomplished only by His grace. Paul saw the danger of resting upon his laurels, 'lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified'. He knew his limits when he said, 'I can will what is right, but I cannot do it' (Rom. 7:18). He knew in his extremity that God's grace was sufficient for him and that he could accomplish nothing without that grace. So, then, any mercy which comes to us does not originate with us: for we initiate nothing. Paul concludes in Romans 9:16, 'So it depends not upon man's will or exertion but upon God's mercy'. In 2 John 1:8 we are warned, 'Look to yourselves, that you may not lose what you have worked for, but may win a full reward'.

All of this does not drive us to despair but simply keeps us from pride, and in the humility of the Spirit enables us to be even more fruitful. If the Father is the Gardener, and He it is who

cleanses the Vine of its proud growth and fruitless branches, then let us delight under His almighty hand that our fruitfulness is increasing.

One day, because of the fact that 'in due season we shall reap if we faint not', we will see what life has all been about. To see 'fruit which remains' will surely stir our pulses and make us rejoice. What that fruit will be we may not even faintly know now, but it will be worth the ancient and yet ever-present command, 'Be fruitful, and multiply . . .' It will be good to hear the voice say, 'Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord'.