The Gospel is Bearing Fruit Around the World
Colossians 1:6

When it comes to the Kingdom of God, there is nothing that can stop it from growing and expanding. But it doesn’t always look that way at the moment.

In Roman times, Christians found themselves facing 10 major waves of persecution in the first 300 years. On the outside, each persecution looked like it was hindering the church, yet history showed a very different result – in the first 300 years Christianity became the dominate faith in the empire even though it was outwardly despised, hindered, mocked and ruthlessly attacked. This growth came from God, not some ministry programs people came up with or culture liking Christians. Take the disease plagues that devastated the empire every 75 years. There was no medicine that stopped it – up to 50% of a city would die. Most people fled to the countryside leaving sick relatives and friends helpless behind. But Christians, not fearing death, went in to be with the sick and dying, putting themselves in harm’s way. That seems like a way to kill the church – yet God turned it to major growth. Yes, many more Christians who were not sick became sick & died helping the infected, but more Christians lived who were sick because of the companionship, intervention of God and basic nursing – and the non-Christians who lived were much more open to believing in Jesus – not to mention all those who heard the gospel in a new way before they died of the plagues.

Or come to more modern day. Christianity is growing fast in China – and there are again uncertain times ahead for them as the new Chinese President is cracking down on churches – both house churches and ones with buildings. Back in the late 1960’s, the dictator Mao Tse Tung unleashed the Great Cultural Revolution which had as one of its goals the elimination of all faiths in the country. When I was in college & seminary in the 1970’s, the old time Chinese missionaries didn’t know if any Christians survived. Then in the early 1980’s, we started getting news of the growth of underground house churches – and a lot of growth. By 1989 the call for greater freedom was heard in China as well as in the 15 countries of the former Soviet Union. The Berlin wall would come down both figuratively & literally and the Soviet Union would cease existence, granting freedom to each of its 15 republics. But in China, the government successfully clamped down on any move towards democracy. The ruthless deaths at Tiananmen Square made it clear no freedom would come anytime soon. To the freedom loving world, this was a disaster, but God used it for good. Before this almost all the growth in the Chinese church was among rural and uneducated peoples – now college students and the intelligentsia started to be open to faith in Jesus Christ! How we feel about a situation when we are in it, bears little resemblance to what God can bring from it in time!

PROPOSITION: It is exciting to see the gospel grow & produce fruit all over the world.

I. Times had become challenging for the Colossian Christians

   A. The city had been in economic & political decline
It is very helpful when we read the Bible to picture the context— that is to picture what the believers were going through at the time. When the book of Colossians was written it was a naturally challenging time for the Christians who lived in that city of Colossae. Historically, we know that the city was on the decline. Before Roman times it was a large and prosperous city with no competition nearby. But in Roman times the government relocated the road leading north. This led to great wealth and growth in the city of Laodicea, a city about 10 miles away and but it also led to the decline of wealth, population, job opportunities & importance for the city of Colossae. There wasn’t a lot happening around them that brought economic, political or future hope.

B. The church had been attacked from the inside by false teachers
In the midst of this outwardly discouraging time, the first church in Colossae was started and it brought hope, love & joy into that darkness. A number of years have passed since the church was first started, now false teachers, who claim to be Christians, were trying to convince people in the church that they were missing important things in their life. Remember in the New Testament, anytime false teachers are mentioned, those false teachers are claiming to be Christian. These false teachers claimed to know a better way to God which involved secret knowledge, rigorous religious rituals, talk of Jesus but denial of His deity, veneration or worship of angels as mediators to God and special privileges to an enlightened few.

C. The church had been attacked from the outside by growing persecution
In addition, the church was probably starting to feel growing opposition from the outside. While the first opposition Christians faced was from Jewish leaders and radicals, by this time Christianity was beginning to be attacked by more secular governmental leaders. All in all, it was a very challenging time for the Colossian believers, so God is seeking to give them a bigger perspective in their challenging times to encourage them.

D. Picture the challenges we face today as Christians
Thus, it will be helpful for us to picture some of the challenges we are facing today both as Christians and individuals so these Bible truths will be clearer to us. What kind of challenges are we facing today? We have a level of anger, hatred & intolerance being publicly expressed around us that is increasing rapidly— including antagonism towards Bible-believing Christians. The overall economy may be moving ahead, but for the majority of people here in Central Vermont our wages and benefits are stagnant. Personal relationships are fracturing all around us and increased drug use is leading to a trail of despair, bondage, crime and harm to kids. Despite all our advances in medicine, more people seem to have undiagnosable or untreatable pain, sickness & physical problems than in past decades. And I haven’t even begun to describe the false claims about truth, God and Jesus that so-called Christians are promoting. So take a moment to consider your own life— what threatens to suck the joy and hope out of your life? (Pause) Now let’s consider a way Jesus encourages us— God encourages us with evidence of the gospel’s power in the world beyond us.
II. God encourages us with evidence of the gospel’s power

Colossians 1:6

By review, the apostle Paul is encouraging believers in their challenging times. In v 1-2, we can be encouraged by focusing on the wonderful benefits God gives us just by becoming genuine Christ followers. READ v 1-2. In v 3 we saw the power of thankfulness – especially when we take time to thank God in prayer for others. READ v 3. In v 4, it is encouraging when we recognize our own growth in faith in Jesus & love for others, not comparing ourselves to others. READ v 4. In v 5, we saw the power of hope when it is based on Jesus’ promises for what He has stored up for us in heaven. READ v 5. Now here in v 6, God encourages us to consider the evidence of the power of the gospel. READ v 5c-6. Let’s look at some of these phrases in v 6 to see the power of the true gospel and how it is transforming people, churches & areas all over the world & encouraging us in difficult times.

A. The gospel comes to us

End of v 5 - “the true message of the gospel that has come to you.” Have you ever considered how amazing it is that someone shared Jesus Christ with you? My family had to move to the Midwest from New England before I first clearly heard the gospel. What is the gospel? That I am a sinner ineligible for heaven, but out of love, Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, came down to this earth, lived to show us God’s way, then died on the cross for my sins so I could be made eligible for heaven – then Jesus bodily rose from the dead to prove His words are all true. I never heard or understood that simple message before & my parents had brought me to church here in NE.

The gospel has come to you – yes, their city of Colossae may be economically depressed, losing population, & insignificant politically, but God made sure His message of hope and transformation came to them as well as the important areas like Rome and Ephesus. God reached out to them, God visited with His saving power, God made things clear that were not clear before. The gospel has come to you and I. How encouraging that is! There are currently 7.6 billion people in this world and God cared enough about you & I that He moved people & situations to bring the good news of Jesus to each one of us here! When things are not going so well around you, be encouraged that Jesus has already reached out to you!

B. The gospel yields positive results

Back to v 6: “In the same way, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world.” Just as the good news of Jesus has brought hope, faith and love into the Colossians lives, so that same gospel is yielding positive results all over the world. We use the words “to bear fruit” a lot in our language. It simply means “to produce positive results” (repeat). Just like an apple tree produces delicious & nutritious fruit called apples and the blueberry plant produces delicious & nutritious blueberries, so we naturally rejoice & get excited when we see positive results from efforts we do. Look around the world and you will see that the gospel of Jesus is having many positive, long term outcomes.
What are some of the results (or “bearing fruit and growing”) that comes from the gospel of Jesus? One fruit is our new life in Jesus. More people will become Christ followers. When we first commit our lives to Jesus in faith, we are given a new nature inside as well as God’s Holy Spirit in our life. Our sins are forgiven, we are reconciled to God and God makes a place for us in heaven. Another positive result is that we are adopted as God’s children – so we are now under His guidance, protection, & care with an incredible inheritance to come!!! Other results include positively growing our character, helping our human relationships as God helps us bring more sacrificial love into them, less worry, more inner joy, wiser morals that have long term positive results. The list is actually quite long.

Many years ago someone was asked, “If you were to pick a gift that would help everyone in the whole world, what would you give?” The person thought about it and came up with a number of good items – books (but many people cannot read); foods (but people eat different things in different parts of the world); clothing (but climates are different); money (not every culture makes use of money). The more this person thought, the more it became clear how great the message of Jesus with its gift of eternal life, really is. It can help every person, in every age and in every country. We all need forgiveness, a new start, reconciliation with God, guidance into the future and a place in heaven. The gospel produces fruit in the internal transformation of individuals, in human relationships and also in the external growth of the church.

C. The gospel grows Jesus’ universal church

READ v 6. “throughout the whole world”. There is a universality to the gospel. It is its transforming peoples’ lives all over the globe, just like it is transforming our lives here in Central Vermont. Isn’t that amazing! There is no universal language, no universal money, no universal habits, but there is a universal message about Jesus that applies to every human who has ever lived. When we open our eyes to what God is doing in the world, it brings encouragement into our lives despite the discouragement or challenging times we face! Jesus’ church is expanding in places we never dreamed it would go and to people we never imagined would willingly humble themselves before Jesus alone! This is an incredible testimony to the truth of the gospel and its power to transform us despite what we temporarily see around us. Unlike the false teachers’ claims that only the enlightened, elite and few can gain God’s fullest blessings, Jesus’ good news is for everyone and was daily reaching new people in new areas of the world! The gospel transcends ethnic, geographic, cultural, and political boundaries.

D. The gospel portrays God’s grace

READ v 6. “since you heard it and truly understood God’s grace”. More than anything the good news of Jesus pictures the greatness of God’s grace. In fact, our salvation is by grace alone! It is not something we can buy, earn or work for. God’s grace is for the whole world – Jesus makes heaven available to any who will humble
themselves before Jesus, repent of their sin, believe Jesus died on the cross for their
sin and rose bodily to prove it.

E. The gospel changes people
If our faith, repentance and surrender is real, this gospel will change and transform our
lives as it did for the Colossian Christians. While we cannot work our way to heaven,
working for Jesus will always come out of truly understanding and receiving God’s
grace in our lives.

III. Is the gospel still “bearing fruit” and growing throughout the world?
So is this gospel of Jesus still bearing fruit and growing throughout the world? Absolutely
and every time we see a decline in the church or our culture, we can be confident that God is
already preparing for a greater harvest where we least expect it!

A. Hidden ones we have been privileged to be part of
Think of some of the hidden ones we, as the Barre Evangelical Free Church, have
been privileged to be a part of that most people won’t learn about until heaven.

1. Middle East
Earlier this year, the news was full of reports of tragedy in the awful warfare in
the Middle East – I am purposely keeping this vague so it can go on our website
and not hurt our brothers and sisters overseas. A short time later we learned that
almost 100 house churches had arisen in the last decade in just one small region
and some of our help for the Middle Eastern refugees had helped them. That is
unbelievable. If Jesus can overcome there, He can overcome anywhere!

2. Papua New Guinea (Bible translation)
Last month Al and Susan Boush were here as they reached 50 years in Bible
translation. When we first took them on in the early 1980’s it was to help one
people group get the New Testament in their language for the first time. When
they finished the Tifal translation, they were sent to Bougainville to get Bible
translation going again after a 10 year civil war. Problem was that there were 28
languages to do and only a couple Bible translation missionaries – plus there
were no new translators in the pipe-line. So we joined with the Boushes in
prayer, with different families taking different languages, and in 5 years
significant progress had started in 20 of those 28 languages without any
additional outside missionaries. That was incredible!

3. Quiet revival in Central Vermont
Or take the quiet revival that we have been a part of here in Central Vermont.
There were not many Bible-believing pastors, churches or people when I came
in 1979. But over the years God has quietly added pastors, new churches,
restored older churches to the faith and brought many to faith by grace alone,
through faith alone and in Christ alone. So much so that around 5 or 6 years ago
we had over 1800 under Bible-believing preaching on Easter in Barre and the 3 little towns around it (Washington, Williamstown and Orange). But we didn’t have even 180 under Bible-believing preaching in Montpelier and the three little towns around it. Those are amazing numbers in Vermont. So when we look around and see things are getting tougher for Christians or that churches seem to be struggling more, remember to look beyond our area and see what God is doing – and let that encourage you.

B. Other encouraging ones happening now

So is the gospel still transforming any people or places in the world today? Absolutely. Because my brother-in-law has been the computer whiz-kid that helped get the Jesus Film get translated into more than 1,600 languages, which have been shown in 225 countries, he learns of God’s work in the most improbable places. One recent movement for Jesus has come in a very closed country in the Middle East. One team went in to show the Jesus film in a particularly dangerous area. They were captured and wounded by terrorist recruiters. But the terrorists were so amazed at the team’s tenacity that they asked how they had such power to be fearless. This led to the opportunity to show the Jesus film.

As the team repeatedly showed the film, one night the tension finally broke. As they all ate a meal the next day the captors asked, “Do you know how many people I’ve killed? Can Jesus actually forgive me?” The team shared their own stories of leaving terrorism to follow Christ. One team member said, “why not? Christ forgave me. He took the shame from my heart!” The entire village turned to Christ and these former radicals are now radical for Jesus! Do you realize right now – when you and I may be discouraged about broken relationships, decline in morals, economic problems, people walking away from Jesus or opposition to Biblical Christianity, there are thousands of these radical extremists who have met Jesus Christ supernaturally. They’re still radical... But they’ve just “switched jerseys” and they’re stopping at nothing to tell everyone around them about Christ! If God is working so powerfully in those situations, He has not forgotten about you and I whatever we are facing!

Or here in the US – I just learned of this this week! Captain Jose Rondon, a US Army Chaplain, has reported that a revival is taking place on the base of Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri. Since March nearly 2,000 troops have reportedly come to the Lord.

"Today, 380 soldiers came to salvation in Christ once and for all. Thanks CH Tony Cech for the excellent, clear, and powerful messages during the 3 services. Since March 11, 2018, we have seen 1,839 soldiers coming to Christ. God's doing an unbelievable work through our military at Fort Leonard Wood, MO. May God bring the same powerful conviction of sin and love for Him that we are experiencing at Main Post Chapel all throughout our Nation and His world."

A soldier named Private Havens shared his testimony about forgiveness in one post.
"I used to have a lot of anger in me. I held grudges against people that have done wrongs against me. And I came here, and I realize that the Lord has forgiven me for my sins and I realize that I needed to do the same to others ... I feel a thousand pounds lighter now that I'm able to let go of the burden of this, not hate, but just feeling wronged. And I have forgiven those that have wronged me. I feel better now."

Retired Major General Doug Carver reported that men and women in the armed services are hungry for God.  

"Our troops, who are increasingly hungry for truth and relevancy in their lives, are finding a faith that works through a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. ...The current spiritual awakening at Fort Leonard Wood is indicative of a great move of God taking place within the Armed Services today."

Meanwhile, Chaplain Jose credits the record number of salvations to the prayers of those who have been praying and encourages them to not stop.  

"I want you to know that God is doing great things. I'm asking you to please pray and help us to see not only today and since March 11th with almost 2,000 people coming to salvation in Christ Jesus, that the Lord is good and he desires not only to reconcile us, to reunite us to himself, through his death, burial and resurrection but also that he desires for the whole world and mainly our country, United States to know that if he's doing great things in the military, he's going to keep doing great things, in and throughout us for his glory in our society so in need of Christ Jesus our King."

Remember God is always at work around us – and when we see the gospel transforming people in places we least expect, let that encourage you and I that our faith is never in vain! Keep overcoming in the power of Jesus.