

## Fruit to the Glory of the Father

*“If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.” –John 15:7-8*

Typically, when we gather for the Sunday morning message at WBC, we look carefully at what *God has said* in His Word. That’s called expositional preaching. But today, for our annual state of the church address, we want to consider what *God has done* in His church. Think of it as *expositional pondering*. Our aim in this special service is to expose the wonderful works God has accomplished in our midst in the past year, and thank Him for it, as well as to anticipate what He has in store in and through us in the upcoming year.

Let’s begin with a question of assessment. Was 2023 a good year for Wheelersburg Baptist Church? That’s a tough question to answer, isn’t it? It certainly was a significant year, with growth in attendance and abundant income. But what does it really mean to say that a church had a “good” year, or for that matter, a “bad” year?

I remember a professor in seminary who talked to us about “bodies, bucks, and buildings.” That’s how churches often define success, he said. And while bodies, bucks, and buildings matter, I’m convinced that we need a different category when we seek to assess the state of the Lord’s church. Thankfully, He Himself has given us that category.

I’ve been thinking about this message for weeks now. In fact, I woke up and dictated the seed thoughts for what you’re about to hear at 2:00 a.m. on Friday morning, December 8. It was then, in the darkness of that night as I was pondering the state of the church, that the Lord brought to mind these familiar words from John 15:1–8:

<sup>1</sup> “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. <sup>2</sup> Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. <sup>3</sup> Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup> If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. <sup>7</sup> If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup> By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

Such a helpful passage, especially when we’re talking about the state of the church. Success is far more than bodies, bucks, and buildings. Success, according to Jesus Himself, is fruit. This is the needed category, according to the Head of the church Himself. What matters is fruit.

Fruit is what Jesus desires, as should we. Fruit is the vital evidence that He is at work. Indeed, there’s progression in our Savior’s words, from “fruit” to “more fruit” in verse 2, to “much fruit” in verses 5 & 8. This is what the Lord intends to produce in and through His followers.

But this of course raises a fundamental question. What *is* fruit. In one sense, the answer is rather obvious. My grandchildren know what fruit is. Fruit is apples, oranges, and bananas. But what does Jesus mean by “fruit”?

For starters, there’s an Old Testament backdrop to this. Fruit is what God intended to receive from Israel. As you may recall, the Lord called Israel His vine. Listen to Isaiah 5:1–8:

“Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. <sup>2</sup> He dug 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. <sup>3</sup> And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. <sup>4</sup> What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry! <sup>8</sup> Woe to those who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is no more room, and you are made to dwell alone in the midst of the land.”

If you want a one paragraph summary of the fourteen-hundred-year story of Israel, there it is. Israel, God’s vine, was supposed to bear fruit. Israel was supposed to show the world what God is like, by putting righteousness and justice on display. But Israel failed to do so, again and again. The vine failed to produce good fruit.

So what did God do? He let the nations destroy His vine. But not completely. He left a stump, a remnant of people. And through that remnant, He sent His own Son into the world, who said in John 15:1, “I am the true vine.”

Jesus came to do what Israel failed to do, indeed what we’ve all failed to do. Jesus came to live the fruitful life that God requires, and He did it in Israel’s behalf, and ours. And it wasn’t just His fruitful life that satisfied His Father, but His fruitful death as well. Jesus went to the cross, as He said earlier in this gospel, “to lay down His life for the sheep” (John 10:11), “to give them eternal life” (John 10:28).

So now, through Him, we can experience life. What kind of life? A fruitful life.

### **What is fruit?**

Before we define the term, let’s go to the end of Jesus’ teaching in this section and notice two key characteristics of fruit. Notice verse 8, “This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit. What is fruit? Fruit is that which brings glory to God the Father. Glory, honor, weight, attention, all to the Father. That’s what the true vine came to produce, and that’s what He intends to reproduce through His branches.

Notice a second characteristic in verse 11, “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.” Joy. *My* joy in you, says Jesus. And *your* joy made complete. This too is a key characteristic of fruit. Glory to the Father, maximum joy to the person connected to Christ.

This is what life in the vine is all about. This is what God is after. It’s why He sent His Son into the world, who kept the law, then died a law-breaker’s death in the

place of His people, and then conquered death. He's after the fullest display of His glory and the fullest experience of our joy.

So, what is fruit? It's not complicated. Fruit is the product of and reproduction of a plant. A peach tree produces peaches, an apple tree, apples, a grape vine, grapes.

What do Christians produce? Christ says, "*I am the vine*. So Christians reproduce Christ. Or I should say, Christ reproduces Christ in the followers of Christ.

This happens in a couple of ways. The first is *Christlikeness*. Christ reproduces Himself by forming a people that resemble Him. "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, self-control (Gal 5:22-23)." That's a description of Christ. He is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, etc. And that's the fruit His Spirit has come to produce in us. Christlikeness.

But it doesn't stop there. Christ doesn't just reproduce Christ *in* His followers, but *through* them. "All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth," says Colossians 1:6. What kind of fruit is that? Not just Christlikeness, but more Christians.

Fruit is evangelism, reaching lost people with the gospel. And fruit is edification, helping saved people grow in their resemblance to their Savior. This is fruit. Fruit is Christ reproducing Himself in us and through us, to the glory of God the Father.

This leads to another question.

### **What does it take to produce fruit?**

In John 15, Jesus answers this question from two perspectives. He begins in verse 1 with the divine perspective, for ultimately *God* produces fruit. Jesus says that His Father is the vinedresser (NIV "gardener") who is so intent on fruit that He takes what may seem to be drastic action. He cuts off branches. Which ones? The ones that do not bear fruit. Furthermore, He prunes the branches that do bear fruit. Why? So that their fruit will increase.

But it's not just God the Father who acts. Jesus says that He Himself is vitally involved in the production of fruit. He says in verse 3 that He participates in the pruning process, and uses His word to make His followers "clean". Interesting word, *clean*. It comes from the same root as "prune" in verse 2. Jesus knows what His followers need if they're going to bear fruit. They need to be pruned, so they are clean, for then they will bear fruit. And He uses His words to do the pruning, the very words He has preserved for our benefit in this book we call the Bible.

"Without me you can do nothing," says Jesus in verse 5. He Himself is the vine. He produces the fruit, not us. We are simply the branches through which He reproduces Himself. Fruit is merely the reproduction of the vine.

That's the divine perspective, and that's where Jesus begins. God produces fruit, God the Gardener, and God the Son who is the vine.

But that's not all, according to Jesus. God has chosen to work through human involvement to produce the harvest He desires. What kind of involvement? According to Jesus, there are four conditions associated with fruit-bearing, and they involve us. He identifies them clearly in verses 7-8.

1. We must abide in Him.
2. His words must abide in us.
3. We must be asking, in other words, *praying*.
4. We must do all of this with the glory the Father in mind.

Humanly speaking, it all begins with abiding. This is the key to fruit-bearing, according to Jesus. *Abiding*. Jesus uses the word ten times in verses 4-11. Again and

again we hear the words, “Abide in me” (twice in verse 4). “Abide in me” (verse 5). “Abide in me (verse 6).” “Abide in me” (verse 7).

What does it mean to abide in Christ? It begins with a basic reality. In order to abide in Christ, one must be connected to Christ. If a branch isn’t connected to the vine, there will be no fruit on it. The same goes for a person. Only those connected to Christ, who are in union with Christ, have the capacity to bear fruit for Christ.

But being connected isn’t enough. Jesus says we must abide in Him, and His words must abide in us. What does that mean? It means we must purposefully depend on Christ. For everything. We must allow Him to live through us. When I am abiding in Christ, I am allowing Him to reproduce His life in and through me. Think of it as *purposeful reliance*.

So no, on our own we cannot produce fruit, for we lack the innate ability to accomplish that miracle. Yet when we are connected to Christ, and when we meet these four conditions (we abide in Him, we allow His words to abide in us, we pray, and we live with the glory of the Father in mind in all we do), and we do all this by faith enabled by His grace, then God Himself works through us to produce the fruit He deserves, and we desire to see.

Friends, there can be a lot of activity taking place in a church (a lot of bodies, bucks, and buildings), and it may be fruit, or may not be fruit. The attendance graph matters, but it cannot tell the whole story. According to Jesus, when He is producing fruit, these are the indicators.

When the fruit is from Jesus, we will see a church made up of people who make it their number one priority to abide in Him. They want to be close to Him. They depend on Him. They yield their lives to Him, to be used for His purposes.

When the fruit is from Jesus, the word of God will be central. We will see people loving the Book, loving to hear it and obey it, who delight in helping others do the same.

When Jesus is producing fruit in a church, there will be a lot of praying happening, a specific kind of praying. People will be asking God to advance His fame, His kingdom, His will, not their own.

And when the fruit is coming from Jesus, people will give the Father the glory. This indicates there may be a type of fruit produced by men in which the Father does *not* receive glory. This is far too common in churches, where there is much man-centered activity. When church is about *us*, the Father does not receive glory. And when that happens, there may be a lot of activity, but it’s not fruit from Jesus.

### **Fruit inspecting**

I lost a good friend this past year, Bill Simon, who was 93 years old. We spent hundreds of hours together in the past decade doing woodworking at his place out in the country. As a master-craftsman, Bill was a wealth of knowledge about anything associated with wood, from cutting down the trees, to slicing the trees into boards at his sawmill, to transforming the boards into furniture in his shop.

Bill was also good at identifying wood. I would ask, “Bill, what kind of wood is this board?” He would examine it closely, and most of the time, give me an answer. He knew that if it’s a cherry, there will be a reddish tint to the wood. If it’s oak, you’ll see the distinctive grain. The same is true for hickory and ash.

Most of us may not be able to identify a tree from wood patterns, but we have enjoyed a good walk in the woods. And we know that if we see acorns on the ground, we’re in the presence of an oak tree. If we see walnuts, or hickory nuts, we know what kind of tree it is.

This is how fruit works. When we see it, we can then identify the source. And this is how we can recognize disciples of Jesus, by their fruit. According to the Master, when we see these four identifiers, we can be sure that He is at work, producing the kind of fruit that He promised He would in John 15.

So, here's the question. Is there evidence that the Lord Jesus produced this kind of fruit at WBC in 2023? I believe there is, all to His glory.

### **Evidence of Fruit at WBC in 2023**

Although there are many, I'd like to highlight three primary evidences of fruit that stand out to me.

#### **1. A church family that abides in Jesus, loves the Word, prays, and seeks to glorify God**

When people ask me, "How are things going?" I often answer that question by saying, "This is a wonderful season for us." And it is, and here is why. The Lord has raised up a church family that loves Jesus, loves His Word, loves to call upon Him, and seeks to do it all to the glory of our good Father.

We see this in so many ways. For instance, last year we spent three months in a special topical series, "*The Joy of Being a God-Centered Church: The DNA of WBC.*" Our aim was to answer the question, "Who are we as a church?" And the answer?

Simply put, we enjoy being a God-centered church. This means that what God does is the basis for what we have and value. We are His workmanship (Eph 2:10). We give Him glory by working out what He is working in us (Phil 2:12-13). And what has He worked into our DNA as a church that now shapes how we function? Twelve commitments that we joyfully embrace:

- Expository preaching
- Preaching the whole counsel of God
- Sovereign grace in the conversion of a sinner
- God centered evangelism
- Church membership, belonging to a local church
- Church discipline
- Biblical Church Leadership
- Growing Disciples through Progressive Sanctification
- Targeted Discipleship (Biblical Counseling)
- Trinitarian praying
- Fulfilling Our Mission, Locally and Worldwide

And as we preached these messages, you said by your words and actions, "Yes, that's who we are, by God's grace!" And that response as a church family is a tremendous example of fruit being produced by the Lord.

It's a joy to pastor a church filled with people who seek to abide in Jesus, who love His Word, who pray, and who seek to glorify our God and Father. This fruit shows up in so many ways.

Here's one way, *a commitment to excellence*. Quality matters to us at WBC. Why? Because we serve an excellent Savior who lives in and through us. And because you sought to abide in Him in 2023, excellence showed up, in many ways.

It starts in the ministry of the Word. We love this Book. We love to go deep in its study, which we do by preaching it, then chewing on it in our community groups. On Wednesday evenings, Pastor Matt organized and led a team of brothers who taught us 1 Corinthians. Our preachers in training took us through the opening chapters of Proverbs

on Sunday evenings. And our various Sunday School classes gave us even more opportunities to enjoy the Scriptures together.

Your commitment to excellence showed up this past June, when you approved \$8,000 for nursery renovations, and a team of 14 individuals helped with this project. We ended up spending \$6,815. And why? We want to provide the highest quality of care for the little ones the Lord entrusts to our care.

Also, Pastor Matt worked hard on leading us through a revamping of our child safety policy, which we then implemented in 2023. We believe that the church of the Lord Jesus ought to provide the highest quality care for children. We now have nearly 75 people who have completed the process.

Because excellence matters, the combined board approved a revised policy and procedure manual in April.

Because of your commitment to excellence, you approved the purchase of an additional \$5,000 of AV equipment for the auditorium. This is yet another expression of your commitment to spread the message of God's Word beyond these four walls.

And so is this. You approved funding so our decorating committee could refurbish the front of the auditorium in the spring.

You also approved the remodeling of our missionary display. Thank you, Allison and Sydni and Austin and Wilma and the trustees, who under Pastor Matt's leadership, invested time and labor to provide us with a quality display that highlights a core value of this church. We love world-wide missions.

This is also why we created a special display to honor Bob and Shirley Litteral, missionaries sent out by WBC in 1965 to Papua New Guinea. The Lord called Bob home to heaven in 2023, after making the gospel known to the Angor people, translating the New Testament into their language, and helping them establish local churches. We're convinced that their story needs to be told again and again, which is why we've prepared booklets. We want future generations to read, be challenged by the story, and then participate in our mission to make Christ known to the nations.

And on and on we could go rehearsing the fruit the Lord produced in this congregation. You voted to increase Nate and Lauren Bell's (our missionaries to South Africa) monthly support from \$125 to \$200 per month.

You continued to minister in prayer for Nahum and Arin O'Brien, after cancer brought them from Norway back to the States. And now they are serving in a church where 30% of the people have been affected by cancer. The sovereign Lord makes no mistakes, and indeed, the care of our missionaries matters to you, for it matters to our Savior who is working through you.

So too does raising up the next generation of Christ's servants. Last winter you approved funds to help parents send their children to Scioto Hills Camp in the amount of 85% per child. As a result, we invested \$5,330 so that 19 young people could learn about Jesus at Scioto Hills summer camp (three high-schoolers went to Revolution camp, eight junior-highers went to Alpha camp, and eight junior age went to New Frontier).

In 2023 you showed your love for Jesus' words by memorizing Scripture together. We sang monthly benediction passages, with help from our primary age children.

You participated in our Gospel Panorama outreach. On Good Friday, we tried to fill this community with the knowledge of what happened on the cross, and why. We provided our neighbors and others with a wooden gospel panorama to assemble, and in so doing, shared the message of our Savior's death, burial, resurrection, and ascension. About a dozen of our men made 150 wooden panoramas. Our tech team, led by Aaron,

made a video of the tutorial which went on our website, as well as our sermon series, entitled, “The Gospel Panorama.”

And there were certainly other evidence of fruit. In 2023, you taught Sunday School classes, prepared food for funeral meals, hosted youth events, and taught children’s church. Some of you served in our Wednesday evening FLY ministry, and VBS. Some of you shared Jesus and His Word with hurting people at CRADLE, or invested in lives at Tri-State Bible college.

Some of you helped us provide this community with over 300 hours of free biblical counseling, to give hope to people struggling with marriage problems, and depression, and fear, and that’s not counting the untold numbers of unscheduled conversations.

Some of you exhibited the fruit of Christ while serving at Scioto Hills camp. Once again, you demonstrated the worth of Christ to more than 5,000 guests, during 18 different retreats and events and during eight weeks of summer camp.

All of this is not simply activity. I believe it is fruit. When you see a church family that is abiding in Jesus, loving His Word, praying, and seeking to glorify God the Father, it’s evidence that the Vine is producing fruit through the branches.

I’d like to highlight a second evidence of fruit that stands out to me.

## **2. A leadership team that abides in Jesus, loves the Word, prays, and seeks to glorify God**

This includes our staff. I’m grateful for Pastor Matt Wilson, for our office manager, Wilma DeCamp, and for Michael Dow and Douglas Goncalves who are a vital part of our pastoral team, with Michael serving as our director of youth, and Douglas seeking to equip the body in the areas of corporate worship, outreach, and assimilation of those new to WBC. One of the highlights in my week is the time I’m privileged to spend with our pastoral team.

This also includes our deacons. It brings me great joy to reflect on the fruit that God produced through the five men who served in this role this past year (Dave, Jack, Ed, Greg, and Dan). Our deacons are spiritual pace-setters, and these men modelled for us what it looks like to abide in Jesus, love His Word, pray, and live for the Father’s glory. I especially appreciate how they made prayer for this church family a top priority.

We also saw God-exalting fruit coming from the lives of our trustees. These five men (Dennis, Joe, Dave, Adam, and Sam) don’t just care for our buildings. They show us how to serve, how to live in dependence upon Jesus. Because they invested many hours in caring for this facility, we were able to gather in it, learn the Word, pray, and encourage each other to live for the glory of our Father. As I said last year, I appreciate their emphasis that whatever we do for our excellent Savior ought to have excellence stamped all over it.

Our deacons, trustees, and pastors comprise what we call our combined board. I’m grateful for these men. To use the body analogy, they are the skeleton, the bones. They exist so that you, the body of Christ, can move and function.

One key role of the combined board is to provide accountability regarding our *mission* and our *money*. These men meet at least monthly to assess what we’re doing, and why, as well as to ensure financial integrity.

So let’s talk numbers for a few moments. Fruit is certainly more than numbers, but it often includes numbers.

When the coronavirus hit in 2020, we stopped passing the offering plates. And the result in 2020 was \$255,396 in general fund giving. In 2021 the number was

\$280,986, the highest in the history of WBC.<sup>1</sup> In 2022, the general fund giving was \$241,719. This past year in 2023 the Lord provided us with \$269,667 in general fund giving. We exceeded our budgeted need by over \$45,000!

Praise be to God for this demonstration of fruit! And thank you church family for your generous giving, to the Lord first and foremost, but also for the work of the ministry at WBC.

As a result of your giving, over \$46,000 went to support our missionaries and other ministries that help us make Christ known to the nations. This means that about one-fifth of our general fund income goes to minister elsewhere.

We love missions at WBC. Once again, last summer we used zoom to interact with many of our missionaries, one per week. We also enjoyed giving to help meet their needs. This included a \$4,000 gift to Feitoria Baptist Church in Brazil to help with their facility repairs. It also included a \$1,500 gift to help Todd Kincaid with extra plane ticket costs.

We received \$2,502 from community center donations (and spent \$2,823 for paint, signs, supplies, etc). Our community center exists, in part, to show this community that we love it, so we can tell them why.

We gave \$700 from our benevolent fund to help someone pay for a transmission repair.

Our Youth Endowment Fund (YEF) produced \$5,844 interest that went into our YAF for use with our children and youth ministries.

There were other special gifts, in addition to our general fund spending, such as our harvest offering of around \$1,600 which we gave to Tri-State Bible College. And there were many other special gifts to help us fulfill our mission.

This past November you once again gave me the privilege to serve as your representative in teaching church leaders in Nepal with Tri-M.

I share these numbers with you as a demonstration of a second evidence of fruit. Praise God, not only for a *church family*, but also for a *leadership team* that seeks to abide in Jesus, that loves His Word, that prays, and that seeks to do it all to the glory of God our Father.

### **3. New people who want to learn how to abide in Jesus, love His Word, pray, and glorify God in their lives**

We have a mission statement at WBC and seek to live it out. “We are Wheelersburg Baptist Church, a church that cares because of Christ. We are dedicated to the Lord Jesus Christ, and to the responsibility He has given us: to make disciples of Christ locally and world-wide, through the proclamation of the whole counsel of God’s

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<sup>1</sup> For comparison purposes, here are some giving and attendance averages from previous years:

2021 - \$280,986 (weekly \$5403) – attendance AM 99 with others at home due to COVID?

2020 - 255,396 (weekly \$4911) – (attendance AM 94)

2019 – 241,352 (weekly \$4641) – (attendance AM 101, PM 51, Wed PM 49)

2018 - 231,897 (weekly \$4459) – (attendance AM 102, PM 47, Wed PM 38)

2017 - \$234,425 (weekly \$4434) – (attendance AM 109, PM 58, Wed PM 44)

2016 - \$247,509 (weekly \$4828) – (120, 55, 47)

2015 - \$239,625 (weekly 4609) – (127, 60, 59)

2014 - \$228,253 (weekly 4367) – (124, 64, 78)

2013 - 226,507 (weekly 4355) –

2012 - 206,588 (weekly 3973) – (136, 73, 86)

2011 - 199,633 (weekly 3839) – (129, 69, 89)

2010 - 197,900 (weekly 3717) – (121, 61, 70)

2007 – 189,347 (weekly ?) – (129, 61, 74)

Word, by which lost people will be evangelized, and saved people edified, until Jesus comes again.”

What we saw the Lord do in 2023 was quite significant. Allow me to put this in perspective. In 2018 our Sunday morning attendance was 102. In 2019 the number was 101. In 2020, which is when COVID began to spread, our number was 94. In 2021 it increased to 99. In 2022, it was 114. At the end of 2023, it was 146.

Three of our members went to heaven last year (Kim Townsend, Bob Litteral, Jean Fannin). According to my count, the Lord brought about fifty-five adult returning visitors to our church in the past twelve months, not counting their children. This does not mean that they have all stayed with us, but many have. We received nineteen new members into our church last year.<sup>2</sup>

And this doesn't tell the whole story. Our current membership is 166. Through the faithful efforts of our technology team, every week we minister to an unidentifiable number of people in their homes.

Our Counseling and Discipleship training is now available online through TSBC. The Lord has opened up a wonderful opportunity for me to write articles for The Focused Pastor, a ministry of Focus on the Family, which seeks to encourage church leaders all over the world.

It's not just that more people are coming to WBC, and watching our services online. It's why. Again and again, we are seeing that the Lord is sending us new people who want to learn how to abide in Jesus, learn His Word, pray, and glorify God in their lives.

We have seen the salvation of sinners this past year. I had the joy of hearing two of you call on the Lord for salvation in my study. We have seen families reconciled. And for this fruit and much more we say, “To God be the glory.”

### **Looking Ahead to 2024**

What's coming in 2024? By God's grace, more fruit to the glory of our Father! Here is some of what we are anticipating. On Sunday mornings starting January 28, we plan to begin a new Sunday morning series on *The Christian Family*, which we'll then discuss in our community groups. Please pray with us that the Lord uses this series to strengthen and even rescue families, for His glory.

Next, we plan to return to and finish our series in the Gospel of Mark, walking through the passion account in Mark 15-16 in connection with our observance of Good Friday and Easter.

And speaking of Passion week, once again we're planning a special outreach initiative, this year called, “*When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*.” This will take place the week of Resurrection Sunday, which is March 31, and will involve another woodworking project (men are needed; if interested, please meet with me Wednesday evening to learn more). Be thinking now who you can invite to your home for a Good Friday outreach, or an Easter Sunday morning sunrise service.

In 2024, there will be Two:Two groups for men, and Titus 2 groups for women who desire to become reproducing reproducers of God's Word. And of course, there will be Sunday School classes, and children's and youth ministries, and summer camp and retreats at Scioto Hills, and many other ministry opportunities. There will be special

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<sup>2</sup> Received by letter/Christian Experience: Tom & Kay Rawlins, Abby Hall, Aaron Picklesimer, Lauren Dolan, Elizabeth Novak, Keith & Valerie Saltsman, Jeremy & Dee Dee Travis, Preston & Brooklyn Hall, Michael & Katelyn Dow; Received by baptism: Austin Hall, Chris Dolan, Eliseo Chicunque, Aliya Bradley, Adree Bradley

prayer times for men during Pastor's Prayer Partners that meets every Sunday morning at 8:30. The Lord willing, there will be another ministry trip to Nepal in November.

As I mentioned earlier, we are so blessed to have three brothers who serve in shepherding roles at WBC in a part-time capacity. Due to other opportunities that have arisen, we have reworked their ministry descriptions for 2024.

Pastor Matt has begun his new role as program director at Scioto Hills, but will continue to serve as our Associate Pastor of Discipleship. Michael Dow, in addition to being our Director of Youth Ministries, is now leading a team of men who will teach the Wednesday evening adult Bible study (in 2 Corinthians), with our deacons leading the prayer times on Wednesday evenings. Douglas Goncalves is serving in a position we are calling "Pastor's Assistant" and is responsible for mobilizing the church in the assimilation of visitors, facilitating joyful corporate worship on Sundays, and leading our Sunday School ministry as Sunday School superintendent.

Douglas and Lacey and their three children just returned from a month in Brazil, and we are continuing to pray with them regarding God's purposes for them in the future.

I'll say it again. It's a great, personal joy for me to meet weekly with these men. I'm so encouraged by their love for Christ and their families, and their devotion to seeing Christ being made much of in this church.

Another CDT began last week, year 25, with nineteen participants! We also are offering our online course through TSBC, which is now up to twenty individuals. This includes four of our friends from Nepal (three pastors and a pastor's wife), a missionary we support in Brazil (Megan Richner), our own missionary Jade Burley in the Dominican Republic, twelve who serve on staff at the Baptist Children's Home in Indiana, another missionary who serves in Nepal (Tom Carr), as well as a pastor in South Africa. Wow!

Preachers in Training will resume in February (on second Sunday evenings), and our brothers will continue our Proverbs series. Men, if you are interested in learning how to preach an expository sermon, this is for you. There is room for more.

We're looking forward to helping children go to Scioto Hills camp again this year. Parents, if you will pay the deposit, we as a church will pay the balance. Be watching for more details. We want to see many young people go to camp this year!

One final thing. There will also be a change in how we conclude our Sunday services. Instead of a parting benediction, as we did last year, we're going to seek to put Psalm 107 into practice in a tangible way. As you may recall, I preached from Psalm 107 last week, and we pondered the command, "Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever! *Let the redeemed of the LORD say so*, whom he has redeemed from trouble (verses 1-2)."

The psalmist is clear. If we have been *redeemed*, and most of us in this room have been, then we are supposed to *say so*. We are supposed to tell our story whenever the opportunity arises.

So we're going to do something to remind ourselves on a weekly basis that if we have been redeemed, we are responsible to *say so*. We will finish our morning worship services with a parting challenge, and on the first Sundays of the month, with someone telling their salvation story.

I want to encourage our community groups, and youth group, and senior group, and FLY, and all other groups in this church, to give opportunity in your meetings for the redeemed to *say so*.

And then, when we scatter into the community, let's continue to say so, so that others may know that there is a God in heaven who redeems the lost.

**Closing Song:** #462 "*Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us*" (all four verses)

Final words: "Let the redeemed of the Lord...SAY SO"