

RIDGE PARADISE

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Friends,

This letter is long overdue. Forgive me for not writing sooner to update you all on what has been happening in Paradise CA, and to say thank you for your OVERWHELMINGLY generous support. This past Sunday, we celebrated Easter in Paradise with those in our church family who remain in the area. And I have felt burdened with the need to write and let the greater church know how we are seeing the power of Christ's resurrection at work in a burned out city. We've heard the phrase "beauty from ashes" used a lot in the last 5 months. But we are beginning to truly see that in Paradise, and so much of it is because of your love, prayers, and financial support.

I could recount what happened on November 8 and share the statistics about the extent of the destruction. But many of you know that information already. Perhaps it's better to share where we are now and how we are planning to use the donations we've received for fire relief.

Our church is alive and healthy. But we've taken a huge hit. Close to 70% of our church attenders from the Paradise congregation have had to move away. Some have relocated to other parts of Northern California; others have moved as far as Tennessee. Obviously, this has had a huge impact on the life of our church. And as hard as it's been to cope with the fallout from the fire, it's been extremely difficult to also have to abruptly say goodbye to so many of our people.

There is a remnant of Paradise folks still here though. Some who have relocated to the surrounding area; some whose homes didn't burn down and are staying in Paradise to be part of the recovery. Because of that, we began to worship in Paradise once again in mid-March...meeting at the home of one of our church members whose house is still standing. The drive to church is surreal...their house is surrounded by the shells of burned out houses and piles of rubble. But our time together so far has been powerful and healing. God is at work there...it's impossible not to feel it. And as each Sunday goes by, we all grow more and more eager to see what God has in store next for our church and the town. Even so, the pain and the sorrow still weigh heavy on us. In the early days after the fire, our attention was devoted almost exclusively to meeting the material needs of our people. We had somewhere around 115 families that we were trying to account for and make sure they had food, shelter, winter clothing, etc. But now, close to 6 months after the fire, the needs have shifted as emotional scars begin to show. So many of our people are wrestling with deep grief and anger and a whole host of other things you commonly associate with PTSD. Stress is putting pressure on marriages, families, school/work. These days our focus is much more devoted to counseling and emotional care as we try to bring the gospel to bear on these wounds.

Our church site in Chico (the neighboring city) has been a big part of this healing. In fact, two families that attend our church site in Chico have organized a marriage conference for a weekend in May that will be specifically designed to help couples navigate the stress that this crisis has put on their marriage. The Chico site was also incredible in the days immediately after the fire...organizing donation centers, taking people into their homes, and volunteering at rescue shelters. We've been so thankful for God's providence and provision for leading us to start the congregation in Chico a few years back. Little did we know then the role this group would play after the fire. But God knew. He was showing His mercy years before we would even be aware of it.

The same thing is true of our partnership with you. On numerous occasions we've been brought to tears by the donations we've received from you through the M.N.A Disaster Relief Fund. Words cannot express the impact your generosity has made on our people. Replaced tools, automobiles, and local housing has allowed people to go back to work. Rent subsidies are helping people find housing in a market that has now skyrocketed in price because of the scarcity. Elderly folks have been set up with social workers to replace prescriptions and find new care facilities. New homes have been furnished. Medical expenses have been shared. ALL of this has only been possible because of the generosity you have shown us. And because your generosity has been so abundant, by God's grace we will be able to continue these ministries of mercy well into the future. We are so thankful and feel so loved. From the bottom of our hearts, thank you.

*"When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream."*

-Psalm 126:1

Grace and Peace,
Josh Lee
Lead Pastor, Ridge Presbyterian Church