

The Harvest

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[0 : 0 0] Now, before we begin, I have an apology to the children, because I haven't prepared a worksheet today, and I was trying to think of some excuses, but I haven't got any good ones, so I won't even bore you with some feeble ones, but I hope next week to rectify that.

Well, we want to consider this evening the theme of harvest. Now, the reason why this matter has been in my mind is very much related to the trip that I was able to make and privileged to make to India, and I had a wonderful time in India, and as I briefly comment in the intimation sheet that you may have seen this morning or this evening, one of the highlights of the time that I spent there was being able to share a brief word from God's Word to men and women in a small village who were very evidently hungry for God and His Word. There was a crowd of certainly 150, maybe more, who gathered in this relatively small village, and many of them have come to faith very recently, in the last year or perhaps at most two years. And I was informed by others who are involved in this kind of work in the rural areas that the scene that we participated in and that we witnessed is repeated in countless villages across the country, particularly the poor, the weak, the marginalized, those deemed insignificant and considered by many of little or no volume, coming in great numbers to faith in Jesus Christ. Now, in that context, it's not surprising that one word that recurred in many conversations was this word harvest, and the point was made, and I think I myself in conversations was speaking in these terms that the church in India, or certainly that part of India I was able to visit, were living in a day of harvest, many folk coming to faith. And of course, as we think of that theme, we maybe think back to others who in the past have sown the seed, some of our own number from our own church who have gone out as missionaries, and of course, many Indian Christians who in decades past have been involved in sowing faithfully, and now the day of harvest has arrived. In that same village that I make mention of, one of the group who went was

Liz Ferguson. Some of you will know Liz, married to Callum Ferguson. Now, Liz in the 80s, I think it was, served as a missionary in India. And as this crowd gathered, and as we participated in this service, she was open-mouthed, and she leaned over to me, and she whispered, she said, never in the time that I was here did I ever see anything like this. And for her, it was even more moving because of her connection with India and having lived and worked and served there. A time of harvest. Now, that language is, of course, biblical. We've read already in Luke's Gospel where Jesus speaks of the fields being ripe unto harvest. It is Jesus who speaks of a plentiful harvest as He exhorts His own disciples.

And so, again, I mentioned that I was pondering on this word and on this theme of harvest. And different questions have been circling around my little brain. And I want you to indulge me, or at least bear with me, as I make public my thinking and tentative conclusions on this matter of harvest. Let's think along these lines. If it is true, as I'm suggesting, from what I was able to witness that in India, or certainly in some parts of India, it is the harvest season, spiritually.

What about Scotland? Where do we stand in relation to this theme of harvest? I wonder what your answer to that would be. If I just give you a couple of seconds to pause and to think. What do you say?

[4 : 47] Okay, harvest over there, but what about here? Are we also in a time of harvest? What do you think? How would you answer that question? What am I, as I stand before you this evening, simply to be a bearer of good news from afar, but resign myself to the reality that, well, it's different here. Yes, a harvest in India, and maybe in other places too, but here the situation is different. Is that the conclusion that we have to come to? Is the spiritual harvest that Jesus speaks to His disciples? Is it geographic? So, yes, in some places there is harvest, but in other places there is no harvest. Is that what we are to conclude? Can it be harvest season in one location, but not another? That is true of physical harvests. The agricultural year is different in different places. Indeed, depending on what you're sowing and reaping, there are different harvest seasons.

And so, in the physical realm, certainly you can say, well, yes, this is a time of harvest here, but not over here. Is that also true spiritually? I simply pose the question and invite you to maybe think of what your answer to that question would be. Are there nations or cities or neighborhoods where there is no harvest, and we must humbly resign ourselves to that God-ordained reality, or in any case, except that our mission is limited to sowing and the expectation that someday the harvest will come? Again, I simply pose the question. Well, I also want to try and answer some of these questions, and to answer these questions, or at least try and answer them, I think we can do no better than turn to consider the manner in which Jesus uses this language of harvest. We find the language used by Jesus or recorded for us in several of the Gospels, certainly three of the Gospels we've read in Luke's Gospel, but our concern this evening, or where we will concentrate our attention this evening, is as we find the language used or recorded for us in Matthew's Gospel. And if you can turn with me to

Matthew chapter 9. Matthew chapter 9, and we'll read from verse 35 through to verse 38. And there you will hear, as you follow the reading with me, how, again, Jesus uses this language of harvest harvest as He speaks to His disciples. Let's read then from Matthew chapter 9 and from verse 35.

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness. When He saw the crowds, He had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into His harvest field. The Word of God.

The first question I want to pose to the passage and find an answer from the passage is, what is the harvest?

[8 : 35] Jesus is speaking of a harvest. He makes the statement that the harvest is plentiful. Well, what is the harvest? And just to emphasize my intent in asking and hopefully answering these questions, it's for us to come to terms with the questions I've already been posing about whether there is a harvest here in Aberdeen, or whether simply we can visit other lands and come back and say, oh, it's wonderful. Lots of people are coming to faith. There's a great harvest. But here, well, here it's different. I want to really explore whether that's a valid way of looking at things in the light of how God uses or how Jesus uses this language of harvest. So, bear that in mind as we ask and hopefully answer the questions. So, the first question, what is the harvest? To what is Jesus referring or to who is Jesus referring in verse 37 when He says to His disciples, the harvest is plentiful? Well, the answer to the question isn't a very difficult one to find. It's very clear that the answer to the question is provided for us in the previous verse. We read in verse 36, when He saw the crowds, when Jesus saw the crowds, He had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, so we've been told about the crowds that

Jesus is seeing. We have those crowds described for us. And then Matthew says that Jesus went on to say to His disciples, at that moment, in that context, the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.

What is the harvest? Well, the harvest are clearly the crowds that are being spoken of. These crowds who are described as harassed and helpless. These crowds who are described as like sheep without a shepherd.

They are the people that Jesus has been ministering to in Galilee. Now, if they are the harvest that Jesus is referring to, what does that tell us about the presence or otherwise of a harvest today in Aberdeen, or indeed in any location that you care to mention? Well, I think the conclusion that we can legitimately come to is that wherever there are crowds who are harassed and helpless, there is a harvest.

The harvest are these crowds who are harassed and helpless. So, if you can find crowds, if you can find people, men and women, who are harassed and helpless, if you can find men and women who are like sheep without a shepherd, then there is your harvest. There is a harvest. So, we say, is there a harvest in India?

[11 : 34] Well, certainly there is a harvest in India. Many people, many crowds, huge crowds. Harassed, yes. Helpless, yes. Like sheep without a shepherd, yes. Clearly, those who are there on the ground are able to appreciate that much more than somebody who is a fleeting visitor. But what about Aberdeen?

Do we have crowds of people in Aberdeen? We're not a huge city, but I think we have a reasonable population. How many folk are there in Aberdeen? 200,000 people. In your daily activity, as you mingle with people, as you have contact with people, do you find any who are harassed? It would be amazing if you can go through a week and not come across anybody who is harassed. Do you come across anybody who is helpless? Do you come across, are you able to discern that around you there are those who are wandering aimlessly through life like sheep without a shepherd? What is your answer to that question?

Are there such people in Aberdeen? What do you say, are there? Yes, of course, there are plenty of these people. There are plenty of crowds who are harassed and helpless. There are plenty who are wandering aimlessly like sheep without a shepherd. And so, conclusion, there is a harvest in Aberdeen. That is the harvest that Jesus is speaking of to His disciples. He is speaking of these crowds. He is speaking of these harassed men and women, of these helpless men and women, of these aimless multitudes, not knowing where they're going. And He's saying, there is the harvest. There is a harvest. And we can say, likewise, there is a harvest in Aberdeen. Another question, an easier one to answer. We have the answer given to us, of course, in the passage, how big is the harvest? We don't need to dwell on this.

Jesus uses an adjective there in verse 37 in His own particular context there in Galilee. He says of Galilee, the harvest is plentiful. The harvest is plentiful. And given what we have already said, and if what we have already said is reasonable, and I leave it to you to come to your own conclusions, whether it is or not. But if what we have said is reasonable concerning what is the harvest, it is crowds who are harassed and helpless, then we can certainly say that if it was true of Galilee that the harvest was plentiful, well, it is even more so true of Aberdeen. There are many more people in Aberdeen than there were in Galilee when Jesus spoke these words. Yes, the harvest is plentiful.

There are plenty people who are harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. Which takes us on to another question that I want us to ponder on for a moment, and that is, what is the problem? What is the problem that Jesus identifies here and that He would involve the disciples in solving or certainly responding to? The problem is clearly not the absence of a harvest. That isn't the problem. The harvest is there. That is not the issue. It's very clear that there is this harvest and that it is a plentiful harvest. The problem, the danger, the concern of Jesus is that this plentiful harvest be left unharvested. This is the concern of Jesus. This is the pressing burden that is bearing upon Jesus. He is going around, as we're told in verse 35,

[15 : 26] He's going around the towns and the villages. He's teaching. He's preaching. He's healing every disease and sickness. But as He looks around, He is conscious that He is not able single-handedly to respond to this great harvest. The needs go beyond His ability to respond. He was limited in where He could be at a given moment in time. He couldn't be in two villages at the same time.

He could attend to the harassed and helpless in one village, but what about the other? Many villages. And so the concern of Jesus is that there is this great harvest, but there is a danger that the harvest will be left unharvested. Now for us, the picture of a harvest that is left unharvested maybe doesn't impact us as I am sure it would His original audience. Those who are hearing Jesus speaking are men women involved in women involved in agriculture, involved in harvesting. Certainly if they weren't all of them personally involved, they were part of a society that revolved around the agricultural year.

Their economy revolved around harvest time and how big or how great the harvest was. They were very much aware of the old idea of the harvest. And for them, the idea that you would have a harvest and leave it unharvested was just obscene. You couldn't think of anything more ridiculous to have this harvest there ready and waiting to be harvested and simply to leave it alone.

Now that sometimes happens. I remember when we were in Peru on one occasion a few years ago, and for reasons that I have no recollection of, the price of maize had plummeted. No doubt in this global village that we live in, something had happened. There had been a bumper harvest in Brazil or whatever, and the price of maize had gone down to very low levels. And I remember speaking to one or two farmers whose farms were very distant from the marketplace. And they were saying to me with tears in their eyes and with this great heavy burden upon them, they were saying, it's not worth my while harvesting. Because what it's going to cost me to find day laborers to go and work and harvest, and what it's going to cost me to pay the transportation from my farm that is so far away to the marketplace, it simply isn't worth my while. And so I simply have to leave my maize to rot on the stocks.

And you can imagine how tragic that would be for that farmer. The thought of there being a harvest, of being these well-grown and high-quality cobs of corn or whatever they're called, and to just leave them to rot. Because in that particular circumstance it wasn't economically viable to harvest them.

[18 : 35] Well, maybe that in a measure can help us to get into the skin as it were, indeed of Jesus himself, and certainly of those who are listening to him, as he presents to them the prospect, this appalling prospect, that there would be this great harvest that would be left unharvested.

The harvest is there. It's the crowds, harassed and helpless. It's plentiful. But the concern, the danger, the fear is that it will be left unharvested. This is the problem.

Now as we fast forward 2,000 years to our own circumstances here in Aberdeen, and could I suggest to you, and I think it's pretty obvious that this is what I'm coming to, is it not reasonable to say that contrary to what is often our thinking, and I include myself in this, is it not the case that contrary to popular thinking or our normal way of thinking, the problem in our city is not the absence of a harvest, but the danger, the very real danger of a tragedy unfolding, that the harvest that is out there, that is out there for all with eyes to see, will be left untouched and unharvested. The crowds are there, the crowds are there, harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. But will they be harvested? This is the question. This is the concern of Jesus. And that is why Jesus responds to it and takes decisive action to ensure that that does not happen, which takes us on to the next question that we want to pose and answer, in fact, the final question. What then is required? What is the harvest? The harvest are the crowds of people, harassed and helpless. It's a plentiful harvest. It was in Galilee. It is in India. It is in Aberdeen. Indeed, wherever there are people, there is a harvest. That is our conclusion. What's the problem? Well, the problem or the danger, the concern is that this harvest is going to be left unharvested, which takes us on to this final question. What then is required? Well, Jesus is very clear in answering this question. He says that laborers are required. The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. Workers are required to bring in the harvest, but not any kind of workers. We have in the passage here, I think, indications as to the characteristics that are needful of those who would be involved with

Jesus in bringing in the harvest. I would suggest there are three characteristics of the workers that are required. Whatever there is a harvest, and of course, that includes ourselves here in Aberdeen.

The first thing that I would suggest concerning these workers that are required is that they are workers who love like Jesus. Workers who love like Jesus. Notice how Jesus is described in Matthew as he goes about harvesting. That's what he's doing. How is he described? When he saw the crowds. When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion on them. He sees the crowds. Sometimes our problem is that we don't even see the crowds. We don't even see the harvest. Jesus sees the crowds, and not only does he see them, but he is moved in his innermost being. The language here is very powerful language. It's the same language that we noticed a couple of weeks ago when we were considering the widow who had lost her son and how Jesus had compassion on her. This same intense language is being used. Jesus sees the crowds, and he is deeply moved by their plight. He is deeply moved by how they are harassed and helpless, deeply moved by how they are wandering aimlessly through life, burdened by all kinds of burdens of one kind or another. He sees their need, he feels their pain, and he has compassion on them. And so he is about the business of harvesting. And that is the example, if you wish, that is the indication that we have concerning the kind of workers that are needed to participate with Jesus in every harvest, in every age. Workers who love like Jesus. Workers who see the crowds and who have compassion on them, that God would grant to us in a measure something of that compassion. We are very aware and very conscious that we fall very far short, but that God by His Spirit would so work in us that there would be in us a measure of that compassion of Jesus, that we might be useful workers in bringing in the harvest. That's the first characteristic that I notice here. Workers who love like Jesus. But secondly, workers who pray to Jesus, what does Jesus say to the disciples? The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into His harvest field. There is this great problem, there is this great need of the possibility, the obscene possibility that the harvest will be left unharvested. And what the disciples need to do is they need to pray to the Lord of the harvest, that He would send out the required workers to bring in the harvest, that nothing would be lost, that all would be brought in.

[24 : 54] So, what are required are workers who pray to Jesus, that they would pray as is made clear here, that they would do so earnestly, that they would ask the Lord of the harvest earnestly. That's the language that is being used here. And that they would direct their prayers to the one who is the owner of the harvest, the Lord of the harvest, Jesus Himself. That, of course, grants to the workers, with all our limitations, great confidence. Perhaps we do see the crowds, and perhaps there is, in a measure, compassion in us that is stirred up as we see the condition that they are in. But maybe we feel very inadequate. Maybe we feel that we simply don't have the resources, personal resources, spiritual resources to respond. And in this call to pray to the Lord of the harvest, there is comfort for us. And we can be confident that it is the Lord of the harvest who will grant to us the strength that we need and the resources that we need. He will ensure that as we involve ourselves, so the harvest will be brought in. We are to pray to the Lord of the harvest. And as I think of that duty, of that need, of that responsibility that is laid upon us, my mind does go back again to the scene that I have in my mind's eye of the villagers there in India.

We got there maybe late afternoon, early evening. As I recall, it was just getting dark, I guess half past six or seven. We were there for an hour at most. But we were told by those who had taken us to the village that those who had gathered there had gathered with the intention of remaining there. It was in a courtyard of a home. It was a very picturesque scene. And the crowd that had gathered there, they very hospitably received us and listened to us. And we're very grateful for our visit, though we had little really to offer them. But what we were informed is that they would remain there.

Their intention was to remain there through the night, singing praises to God and praying to the Lord of the harvest. They would pray earnestly that the harvest that they could see, that they had been part of and now were privileged to be workers in bringing in. They would be praying to the Lord of the harvest, that he would send out the workers and that he would ensure that the harvest be brought in.

That is something that we must also do. The workers that are required are workers who are to love like Jesus, who are to pray to Jesus. And then finally, they are to be workers who are called by Jesus.

As we read on to the beginning of chapter 10, we read, He, Jesus, called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness. And then the passage continues to describe the work that they were involved in, in harvesting this great harvest. Indeed, the very ones, the very ones who are exhorted to pray are the very ones who are then called to go. And so we are to love like Jesus, we are to pray to Jesus. But as we do pray this prayer, that Jesus would send out workers into his harvest field, we must pray it in the clear understanding that he will then say, very well, you go, you go into the crowd, you go and bring in the harvest that you are surrounded by. We are called by Jesus, we are given authority by Jesus.

[28 : 53] That too is something that we should be aware of when we maybe feel overwhelmed by what is out there. When we feel overwhelmed by the obstacles that we imagine that we will have to confront.

Well, let us remember that we go, not in our own strength, but we go having been invested with the very authority of Jesus. He calls us and he grants us the authority that we require.

And so called, so invested, so we are to go like Jesus throughout all the cities and villages, ministering to the spiritual and the physical needs of the crowds. This then is required.

So as we draw things to a close, I wonder if you come to the same conclusion that certainly I have come to as I have pondered on these things in the light of God's word, that the harvest is there. It's not just in India. It's not just in South America or in Africa.

It's not just somewhere else. The harvest is here. Here there are crowds. Here there are many harassed and helpless. Here there are countless who are like sheep without a shepherd. The harvest is there.

[30 : 17] The great danger, the great potential tragedy is that the harvest be left unharvested. The manner in which that will not happen is when there are workers of the kind that Jesus was looking for and calling there in Galilee.

Workers who love like Jesus, who pray to Jesus, who are called and granted authority by Jesus, and who go, who go out into the crowds and go about the business of harvesting.

God grant that we would be such workers. Let us pray.