

## Essential Truths III: Working With God

# 11

## Sent into the Harvest

One of the most vibrant images used throughout Scripture is that of a harvest. As **Joel 3:13-14** describes it:

“Swing the sickle, for the harvest is ripe...Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision.”

The image of harvest is often used to depict the turning of souls to Christ. Sowing is used to picture the preaching of God’s Word, while reaping is used to illustrate the gaining of a soul for Christ.

**Read Mark 4:26-29**

**Read Matthew 13:36-43**

**Read Revelation 14:15-16**

Let’s explore this image of harvest, so that we can more fully understand our role as a harvester with the Lord.

### Two Key Understandings

The Bible reveals two vital facts about the spiritual harvest. These two facts will change our attitude toward evangelism:

#### ***Firstly, there is a harvest***

In **John 4:35**, we find Jesus telling his disciples:

“Do you not say, ‘Four months more and then the harvest’? I tell you, *open your eyes and look at the fields!* They are ripe for harvest.”

The Birthright

Taking the Baton

The Great Commission

The Body of Christ

The Ministry of Every Believer

Joining the Work of God

The Tree of Life

The Ministry of Reconciliation

Filled with the Spirit

Ministry to the Body

▶ **Sent into the Harvest** ◀

Speaking the Word of God

A Lifestyle Gospel

Salt of the Earth

Enforcing the Victory

Signs and Wonders

A New Kind of Leadership

Establishing a Daily Church

Making Disciples

The New Wine

The Goal of Ministry

There is a sense of urgency at harvest time. Any farmer will tell you that when harvest time comes around, all other priorities are down-rated. Time is short; all effort is put into bringing the harvest in.

### ***There is a Lord of the harvest***

In **Matthew 9:37-38**, the Lord doesn't just emphasize the fact that there is a harvest. He also stresses that there is a harvest agenda. He says:

“The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask *the Lord of the harvest*...to send out workers into *his* harvest field.”

It is not good enough for us to realize that there is a harvest. We must also understand that there is a Lord of the Harvest. The harvest field belongs to God, not us. He doesn't want his harvest trampled down by careless workers. So he *trains* his workers and he *sends* them out. As God's harvest workers, we must obey His directions.

Becoming an effective harvest worker, therefore, depends on a combination of these two elements:

- Recognizing the harvest
- Obeying the directions of the Lord of the Harvest

As we understand our need in these two areas, we can ask the Lord to open our eyes – not just to the nature of the harvest, but also to his plans for his harvest field.

## **Looking Through Harvest Eyes**

God wants to open our eyes to see the harvest the way he does. We often look at the people around us and see hearts hardened against the Gospel. The Lord sees beyond the outward appearances to a harvest ripe for reaping. “Open your eyes,” he says. “Look at those around you. See the harvest the way the Lord of the harvest sees it.”

We see this illustrated clearly in the very place where Jesus made the declaration, “Open your eyes...”

### **Read John 4:35-42**

When Jesus told his disciples, “...open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest,” he was referring to a specific Samaritan village. As we trace through the story of **John 4**, we discover a very interesting but easily overlooked fact. Jesus did not even once step foot in the village! Although the harvest was ripe, the starting point for that harvest was with one woman at a well outside the village.

In Jesus, we see the model harvest worker. In **John 5:19**, he would later encapsulate the primary principle of all harvest work in the statement:

“...the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.”

What Jesus was saying was that his activity was synchronized – locked in step – with the activity of his Father. Yes, Jesus saw the harvest, but he also saw exactly what the Lord of the Harvest was doing in his harvest field.

The fact of the matter is that the Lord of the Harvest is constantly working in his harvest field (note **John 5:17**). And he has been working in his harvest fields long before you came on the scene. You are now being asked to join *his* work, not, as we think so often is the case, the other way around. The work of the harvest is a tandem yoke – you and the Lord of the Harvest working together.

## Four Stages of Harvest

### Read Mark 4:26-29

As the Lord of the harvest, God has a way of doing things in his harvest field. As a worker in his harvest field, it is important for you to learn those ways.

The starting point for seeing the harvest field as the Lord of Harvest sees it is to understand that at any particular time, the harvest can be at one of four stages:

- Plowing
- Sowing
- Watering
- Reaping

Let's take a look at each of these four stages in more detail.

### ***Plowing***

#### Read Hosea 10:12

Hosea here is using the imagery of harvest to describe the principles of experiencing God's blessing in your life. In order to “reap the fruit of unfailing love,” two things must be done:

- Sow for yourselves righteousness
- Break up your unplowed ground

The plowing stage is a picture of God's work in the lives of those who are not yet ready to receive the seed of God's Word. This may be due to grief, hardness or ignorance (**Ephesians 4:18**).

In his parable of the sower (**Matthew 13:3-9,18-23**), Jesus described four types of ground:

- **Hard ground** – *hearts that are hardened against the Gospel*
- **Rocky ground** – *hearts whose response has no depth*
- **Thorny ground** – *hearts entangled by worldly cares*
- **Good ground** – *hearts that respond to the Gospel*

When most people read this parable they assume that there will always been more hard, rocky and thorny ground than good ground, but the original hearers of Jesus' parable probably envisioned a different scene. In order to understand the parable, we need to bring to mind the nature of farming in Jesus' day.

Farm plots were usually small rectangles of prepared soil. Around the perimeter of the farm plot was a hard-packed dirt path – the “hard ground” that Jesus referred to. Also at the outer extremities of the plot were patches of thorny and rocky ground. Yet in the center of the plot was the good ground, carefully prepared for the sowing of the seed.

A properly prepared harvest field should always have more good ground than hard, rocky and thorny ground. No farmer sits around and blames a poor harvest on the fact that there is so little good ground. No, he works the ground. He clears the field of rocks and thorns and plows the field until it is ready for sowing.

In the same way, spiritual plowing makes the ground of people's hearts ready for the seed of the Gospel. In **Isaiah 28:24-26**, we find the Lord asking rhetorically:

“When a farmer plows for planting, does he plow continually? Does he keep on breaking up and harrowing the soil? When he has leveled the surface, does he not sow caraway and scatter cummin? Does he not plant wheat in its place, barley in its plot, and spelt in its field? His God instructs him and teaches him the right way.”

So how do we work with the Lord in the plowing stage of the harvest? Prayer is an important aspect of the plowing process. We plow the harvest field with our prayers and our lives, and God plows it by bringing problems and difficulties that, like a plowshare, turn the soil of people's hearts over. As a worker in God's harvest field, you need to be sensitive to the need for plowing.

### **Read 1 Corinthians 9:10**

#### ***Sowing***

### **Read 2 Corinthians 9:6**

Although speaking specifically concerning generosity, Paul draws on an important principle of harvest in this verse. The reaping is in proportion to the sowing.

The sowing phase is important because this is where the harvest eventually comes from. When you sow a seed into someone's heart, you may not see immediate results. But the sower still plays a vital role in the harvest process.

Sometimes the sowing seems to be without reward. The harvest can feel such a long way off. But when God's Spirit begins to move on a community, the reaping can often overtake the sowing and plowing.

### **Read Amos 9:13**

## ***Watering***

### **Read 1 Corinthians 3:6**

The watering phase of the harvest falls between sowing and reaping. At this stage, the seed of God's Word may be dormant in the heart of an unbeliever. But with watering, the seed will begin to sprout. Watering is a reinforcing of the witness already given.

## ***Reaping***

### **Read Psalm 126:5-6**

Reaping is a time of great rejoicing. But when we lead a person to receive Christ, we must remember that we are just one of many workers in God's harvest field. We are reaping what someone else has sown, just as we have sown and another may reap. As Jesus put it:

“Thus the saying ‘One sows and another reaps’ is true. I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor.”

We must recognize what stage of harvest an unbeliever is at. We are then able to cooperate with God in his work of harvest. Whether we sow or reap, we need to always be conscious that we are part of a team of harvest workers. There should never be competition and selfish ambition amongst the harvesters. We must never wage “turf wars” over sections of the harvest field. This is why Paul wrote in **1 Corinthians 3:7-9**:

“So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field.”

## **A Balanced Understanding**

Seeing the harvest and responding properly to the priorities of the harvest depend on a balanced understanding of the harvest field. There is a tension between two equally important, yet seemingly contradictory, realities:

### ***There is a timing for harvest***

Not every harvest field is immediately ready for reaping. Do you remember the story of the woman at the well? Jesus impressed on his disciples the reality of a ready harvest, unseen to them but seen to the Lord. The result was “[m]any of the Samaritans from that town believed in him...” (**John 4:39**).

Yet not every Samaritan village was ready for harvest. We know of one Samaritan village that quite violently rejected Christ (**Luke 9:52-56**). And later, during the ministry of Philip, we find that many in one unnamed city in Samaria turn to Christ (**Acts 8:5-8**). We must remember that each person is at a different stage.

Each community is at a different stage.

## ***Harvest is now***

### **Read 2 Corinthians 6:2**

But there is an equally important fact that harvest time is now! God is always at work, and even if a community is not yet ready for a sweeping harvest, there are always individuals who are ready for reaping.

Do you remember what Jesus said to his disciples?

“Do you not say, ‘Four months more and then the harvest’? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. Even *now* the reaper draws his wages, even *now* he harvests the crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together.”

There is an “even now” aspect to your work with the Lord. What stage is your community in? Does it need plowing or sowing or watering or reaping? But regardless of the stage of harvest work, you can ask God to open your eyes to see those who ready for reaping now.

## **Making the Most of Every Opportunity**

### **Read Ephesians 5:14-17**

Paul warned the Ephesian Christians: “Be very careful, then, how you live.” He then explained what it meant to live carefully:

- Not as unwise but as wise
- Making the most of every opportunity
- Not being foolish, but understanding what the Lord’s will is

In **Colossians 4:3-6**, he expounded on what he meant by “making the most of every opportunity”:

“And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. *Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity.* Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.”

It is the combination of two things that make an effective harvest worker:

- Wisdom in the way you work in the harvest field
- Making the most of every opportunity in the harvest field

These two things come from an understanding of what the Lord’s will is – how the Lord himself works and acts in his harvest field.

God’s burning desire is to reach a lost world (**2 Peter 3:9**). He plans a great harvest, not only among your own people, but also beyond – to other peoples, lan-

guages and tribes around you who have not yet heard the Gospel. He wants you to join him in the harvest.

As Luis Palau once put it:

“The urgency of the hour stares us in the face. The task before us is massive. The time is short, therefore let us ‘make the most of every opportunity’ to evangelize.”<sup>1</sup>

So important is this harvest that God has pinned the timing of Christ’s return to its fulfilment. As Jesus declares in **Matthew 24:14**:

“And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.”

How great is your desire to see the Lord Jesus return? Well, that return is linked to the harvest field. We are encouraged to “[a]sk the Lord of the harvest...to send out workers into his harvest field.”

### Read Romans 10:13-15

As our heart beats in sync with the heart of the Lord of the harvest, our response will be that of Isaiah in **Isaiah 6:8**:

“Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I. Send me!’”

<sup>1</sup> Luis Palau, Foreword, *A Guide to Evangelism*, (United Kingdom: Marshalls Paperbacks, 1984).