

The Harvesting Of The Firstfruits

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In the Old Testament, the Feast of Pentecost is called the "Feast of Harvest, the firstfruits of your labors which you have sown in the field" (Exodus 23:16). It culminated a grain harvest that began with the "Feast of Firstfruits," which we know as the day of the wavesheaf, when the firstfruits of the barley harvest were offered before the Lord (Leviticus 23:10-14). As we understand, Jesus Christ fulfilled the wavesheaf offering, being the first of the firstfruits of God's spiritual harvest, which ultimately includes those He calls into His church (I Corinthians 15:23).

Because it parallels Israel's spring grain harvest as opposed to the fall harvest of fruits and vegetables, this "harvest of the firstfruits" has often been referred to as the early harvest of the children of God, the members of which become the Bride of Christ. These connections are well-known in the church of God, but the "how" of this harvest has not been so clear. How will Christ reap the harvest of firstfruits?

Throughout God's Word, the writers use agricultural imagery to explain what God is doing. As we have seen, many of the festivals have agricultural themes, and Herbert Armstrong taught that God's holy days spell out His plan for mankind. In keeping with the agricultural metaphor, if the process of reaping grain parallels the spiritual harvest of God's children, perhaps we should ask, "Just how was barley reaped in Christ's day?"

In addition, we should also consider whether the harvest of the firstfruits has already begun. The answer that will appear in this article is pure speculation at this point. However, if we believe that the harvest analogy holds true to this extent, the argument that it is already in process can be convincing. At worse, it is good fodder for meditation and conversation.

Ancient Grain harvesting

The harvesting of grain in biblical times was not just a one- or two-day chore as it is today, when a modern combine harvester can cut, thresh, and clean the grain in a large field in a matter of a few hours. In addition, within a very short time, the grain can be hauled to storage bins for later use. Today, this process is done when the grain is fully ripe and ready for immediate use, yet such was not the case in ancient times, as we will see.

When fully developed and ready for use, grain is golden brown in color. Most of us have observed fields of grain at harvest time, and waves of that golden brown color is what we see. Farmers know that the grain must be this color to be mature and ready to be released from the husk that attaches it to the head of grain. At this stage, it is hard and can be ground into fine flour.

Unlike today's method, in early times the grain harvest had to begin *before* the grain was fully ripe so that it would not fall out of the husk prematurely, for instance, while it was being cut. Even though it was harvested earlier, the grain was sufficiently developed to ripen on its own, but the important element to note is that the husk still held the grain securely until it dried, hardened, and was ready to go through a process known as threshing.

Determining when the time was right for the grain to be cut was of prime importance, since cutting it too early would result in immature grain and cutting it too late would mean losing some or all of the harvest. The landowner had to decide when the grain was developed enough but not yet fully ripe, that cutting it would not cause it to be loosened from the husk.

Christ provides a clue as to when it was the best time to cut the grain in John 4:35: "Do you not say, 'There are still four months and then comes the harvest'? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest!" Obviously, in an agricultural year, there are many more crops to be harvested after the barley, which would take as many as four months to accomplish. However, Christ refers to the early harvest of His church, which He says is ready to harvest.

His statement gives us information about when the harvest began in those days: The cutting, no doubt, began when the crop was "white." This is the transition color between the green of immature grain and the golden brown of fully ripe grain. At this stage, when the grain is still white, a reaper, using a very sharp sickle, cut down the standing grain.

At this stage, one might ask, what happened to the grain until it reached full maturity? Did the farmer just leave it lying in the field after it was cut? The answer is a resounding, "No!" To have done so would have subjected it to the ground moisture, causing it to rot before it was dried and ready for threshing.

The solution to this problem was relatively simple. After the stalks were cut and lying on the ground, harvesters came along and gathered them, tying them into small bundles known as "sheaves." The sheaves were then stood upright by leaning several sheaves against each other, the resulting shape resembling an Indian tepee. These groups of sheaves were called "shocks." Normally, between 15 to 20 sheaves made up one shock.

The cone shape of the shock provided support for the sheaves, keeping them from falling to the ground, and allowed the air to pass through the standing stalks, giving the grain the opportunity to age to maturity. It also allowed any moisture from rain or dew to drain from the heads of grain.

Many shocks were scattered around the field, where they would stand until it was determined after a period of many days that they were ready to be threshed. Then, the shocks would be carefully hauled to the threshing floor, and once there, the fruits of grain were secure. Once inside the threshing floor, the grain was ready for the next step in the process, threshing, when the grain was separated from the husks.

The stalks were held and shaken to remove the grain from the husks, and if they proved stubborn, the grain heads were gently beaten with an instrument. Once removed, the next and final step, winnowing, had to be done to prepare the grain for food. Winnowing is done by throwing the grain up into the air on a breezy day and letting the wind blow any remaining chaff from it. Any foreign matter—tares or any other unwanted substance—would be removed, and only clean, ready-to-use grain would remain.

Incredibly, this method of harvesting was used until the early 1900s, when a machine called a "Binder" was invented. This machine, pulled around the field by draft animals, cut and bound the sheaves and deposited them behind it to be picked up by harvesters and put into shocks. They used the same method to dry and mature the grain as had been done for centuries.

A threshing machine had also been invented to thresh the grain. Unlike the more modern combine, however, the shocks of grain had to be carried to it and fed into it in order to be threshed. These were the precursors to the modern-day combine.

The Son of Man's Harvest

So, has the harvest of the firstfruits already begun? We can apply these parallels to what has happened in the church during the last few decades, and perhaps come to a conclusion. Notice Revelation 14:12-16:

Here is the patience of the saints; here are those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus. Then I heard a voice from heaven saying to me, "Write: 'Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.'" "Yes," says the Spirit, "that they may rest from their labors, and their works follow them." Then I looked, and behold, a white cloud, and on the cloud sat One like the Son of Man, having on His head a golden crown, and in His hand a sharp sickle. And another angel came out of the temple, crying with a loud voice to Him who sat on the cloud, "Thrust in Your sickle and reap, for the time has come for You to reap, for the harvest of the earth is ripe." So He who sat on the cloud thrust in His sickle on the earth, and the earth was reaped.

Notice that the first statement made in verse 12 is that the saints who are keeping God's commandments will need to exercise a great deal of patience and trust Christ to lead them through the trying times ahead. Verse 13 indicates that some of the saints will die during this time of great duress. However, He reassures us that those who do so will be at rest from their labors and their works will not be forgotten.

Verse 14 presents a description of Christ as the Reaper, and we see Him with a sharp sickle in His hand in preparation for starting the harvest. In verse 15, He is given the order to begin "the harvest of the earth," or more particularly, the harvest of those on the earth who are His and who are "ripe" and ready to be reaped. Remember, this is *His* harvest, that of the firstfruits. Other harvests will indeed be reaped in the future, but this one is a "special harvest" of His Bride.

Verses 17-20 shows another harvest being done at about this same time or just afterward. However, the reaper is an angel, and this harvest is not of grain but of grapes, which are thrown into the winepress of God and crushed. Obviously, a great deal of blood is shed in this reaping. We do not want to be included in this second harvest.

Returning to the details of harvesting in ancient times, we can draw a few parallels to what has happened to the church in the last few years. The time at which the church began to fracture may be when the cutting of the harvest began.

Unless he had a very small field, the reaper would not be able to cut his whole field in one day. The harvest in Revelation 14 encompasses the whole earth, possibly implying that it might be done in stages. What would be cut first would be determined by how ripe the grain was in a particular part of the field. As we know, after the apostasy had begun, a few "smelled a rat" early and began to leave. However, as it became apparent to more people, the exodus from our former affiliation proceeded at a much faster rate.

Recall that the standing grain was mature enough to be cut, but not so ripe that it would be dislodged from the husk. Each newly cut stalk was removed from its source of nourishment and had to become fully mature, hardening and enduring the elements without direct contact with the earth.

To preserve the grain, the farmer had to provide a method in which this process would occur, so he had his harvesters gather the stalks into sheaves and tie them together. Might the sheaves represent the small groups that meet each Sabbath in their homes or other places provided for them?

Remember that the sheaves were then stood with other sheaves and leaned against each other, forming shocks, which provided the support needed while the sheaves dried and continued to mature. The various groups of God's church scattered around the world, in whatever way God has ordered them, can be likened to the shocks. They provide a haven for the "stalks and sheaves" to continue to mature.

Protected for Threshing

To ensure that none of the grain is lost on the way to the threshing floor, it must be closely watched so that it will not become too ripe and fall out of the head. After all his hard labor, the landowner wants to ensure that he reaps a complete harvest. Notice what Jesus says in John 6:39-40: "This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, . . . [and] that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day."

The time between cutting the grain and hauling it to the threshing floor can be many days—just as many years have passed since the apostasy began. The reaper, as we have seen, must constantly watch the grain to see when it is the right time to take it to the threshing floor. He will do this about two or three days before the threshing, so that the grain is still being held by the husks and none will be lost in transit from the field to the threshing floor.

Once inside the threshing floor, protected from the elements of the weather, the reaper must wait for the grain to harden, when it can be easily removed from the husks. Perhaps we could say that, at this stage, the grain is representative of the church in a Place of Safety, protected from the "grape" harvest described in Revelation 14:17-20.

Once the harvest is protected from the elements and fully mature, the threshing can begin. Recall that this is done by shaking or gently beating the heads of grain to loosen them from the husks. We have often surmised that the Place of Safety will have its share of trials—parallel to the shaking and gentle beating of the grain—to remove us from our self-centered shells.

At this point, the grain from one stalk is mixed with grain from other stalks, and there is no way of determining which grain came from which stalk, sheaf, or shock. In the analogy, then, our group affiliations will no longer be of any consequence. We will all be at one with Christ and with each other. God will do an amazing work to bring His harvest to such a unity that there will no longer be any egos and schisms in the body.

The harvested grain is now ready for its final phase, winnowing. In our parallel, this is the resurrection. The grain is thrown up into the air, and the wind removes all foreign debris and other chaff, leaving only usable grain. So will God's firstfruits be lifted into the air and purified, completing the harvest.

What About Tares?

Many may wonder when the tares will be removed. Jesus answers the question in Matthew 13:30: "Let both [wheat and tares] grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, 'First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"

The reapers would avoid cutting any tares unless they grew among the grain. However, if it meant leaving any grain in the field, they would cut it along with the grain, and let others pick it out when bundling the sheaves. As a last resort, it would be left until winnowing, when the wind would blow it away. Tares in the church, then, may be removed in stages as Christ's return nears.

Finally, how does this analogy account for the grain left in the corners of the field or missed by the reapers, so the poor of the land could eat (Leviticus 19:9-10; Deuteronomy 24:19)? Even though the landowner did not harvest the grain, the poor nonetheless gleaned it for food in their time of need.

We can perhaps understand this grain as those of God's children whom He leaves in the world (that is, outside the Place of Safety) to feed the many spiritually starving people who will need guidance and help in the Great Tribulation. This opportunity to serve under these most difficult conditions may cost many of them their lives, but if they are faithful in doing so, they will prove their worthiness to God.

Never forget the tremendous opportunity God is giving each of us to be one of the firstfruits in His Family. The way may be difficult at times, and we may become weary, but the rewards far outweigh any of the trials we may have to endure. As Revelation 14:12 intimates, we need to hang on and exhibit patience. Nevertheless, as Christ says in John 4:35, "The fields . . . are already white for harvest!" If the early stages of that harvest have already begun, we do not have long to wait.