

## The Present Harvest (Part Two)

Everyone's Responsibility

Charles Whitaker

Given 17-Oct-19; Sermon #FT19-04A

This is the second half of a two-part sermon entitled "The Present Harvest." I delivered the first part in early September. Because any number of you may not have heard it, I need to devote a few minutes to reviewing my comments at that time.

Matthew, in chapters 8 and 9, rehearses some twelve miracles, most of them healings and the exorcism of demons. Matthew comments:

**Matthew 9:35-38** Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people. But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, "The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest."

The adjectives *weary* and *scattered* in verse 36 tell us that Christ had compassion on the people because they were despondent, discouraged, harassed, dejected. One translation of verse 36 paraphrases those two adjectives with the turn, "their problems were so great and they didn't know what to do or where to go for help." They were truly sheep without a shepherd. Their religious leaders merely exploited them, feeding themselves rather than the flock, as God puts in Ezekiel 34:2. The people were disoriented, headed for a ditch.

In verse 37, Christ makes a remarkable statement: The harvest is plentiful. There were so many who could be gathered in, would they permit it! The noun *harvest* there does not refer to a future ingathering, as at the White Throne Period, but to a harvest in Christ's time. In John 4, Christ tells His disciples

**John 4:35** [L]ift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest!

But, alas, Christ laments, the laborers are so few. Who will do the gathering?

Christ's description of the multitudes of His day is applicable to the folk of modern-day Israel. They too, besieged by Satan's lies on every turn, assaulted by demons right and left, do not know what to do, whom to believe; they are unable to tell truth from fiction. They list, more, they reel, like a rudderless ship in full mast in a sudden nor'easter. Their captains, drunk with power and wealth, lack both credibility and wisdom. Corrupt to the core, they are both unwilling and unable to teach the people even the fundamentals of godly morality. The outworking of the prophecy of Daniel 12 seems before us. In the end times, Daniel writes, there will

**Daniel 12:4** (*The Message*) be a lot of frantic running around, trying to figure out what's going on.

With that review behind us, please turn to Matthew 10. Christ understands that the masses of His day are in dire straits. There is so much that could be done for the people—needs to be done—but so few to do it. How does Christ respond to this situation? Well, He delegates the job to His disciples.

**Matthew 10:1** And when He had called His twelve disciples to Him, He gave them power over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease.

Skipping to verse 5:

**Matthew 10:5-8** These twelve Jesus sent out and commanded them, saying: “Do not go into the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter a city of the Samaritans. But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And as you go, preach, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons . . .”

With these words, Christ commissions the disciples to do just what *He* had been doing, as narrated in chapters 8 and 9. Even His rhetoric is the same. For example, in Matthew 9:36, He likens the masses to people having no shepherd. Ultimately, such sheep wander away and become lost. In Matthew 10:6, He tells the disciples to go to those “lost sheep.”

Let us shift our focus to verse 23, where, in my view, Christ drops a bombshell. This is pivotal.

**Matthew 10:23** “When they persecute you in this city, flee to another. For assuredly, I say to you, you will not have gone through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes.”

Persecution drives this work of healing and preaching that the Kingdom is near. When it gets too hot in one city, do not stick around. Go to the next. Both Christ and Paul did this repeatedly, withdrawing when it was wise to do so. Christ goes on to say that, even driven by the impetus (the momentum) of persecution, His disciples will not have time to go through all the cities in Israel before He returns. The verb there, “gone through” is the first occurrence of the Greek verb *tele*, which means “to finish” or “to accomplish.” In fact, you will find it translated as *finished* just a few words down your lap, at its second occurrence, at Matthew 11:1. They would not finish the job “before He returns.”

For perspective, understand that, in verse 18, Christ had already begun to expand the scope of His comments *beyond* Galilee. There, as He elaborates about persecution, He speaks of “governors and kings”; He brings up the Gentiles. He is expanding His comments to cover lands far away and times into the future, beyond the preaching of the Twelve in Galilee in 28 AD. Then, in verse 23, He moves further into the future, into the end-times, the time of His return.

No, as I mentioned in a sermonette on October 12, 2019, He is not talking about the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD. Much further ahead than that. He carries us from history to prophecy, transports us from the Twelve preaching and healing around Galilee in about 28 AD to their successors’ healing and preaching the nearness of God’s Kingdom in Israel—remember, they were not to follow the road to the Gentiles—long after the apostles had died, in the last days—the time of Christ’s return. The instructions that Christ gives in chapter 10 pertain not only to the original disciples, but to those preaching and healing at the time of His return. Matthew 10, therefore, falls into the realm of prophecy.

I do not know how many cities Israel occupied in 28 AD, worldwide, but Christ knew the number would certainly swell once God bestowed the birthright blessings on Israel after about 1800 AD, blessing Israel, giving a double portion to Ephraim and Manasseh—Britain and the United States, the “fruitful bough” nations. Christ knew He was speaking of a time well in the future. He knew that those cities—today, there *are* actually thousands of them—would exist *until* the scattering of Israel, that is, until the land vomits Israelites out, away from the lands given them by God. These many, many cities will remain populated until Jacob’s Trouble begins.

Christ’s comment in verse 23 cannot refer to a time *after* the cities will be depopulated and/or destroyed, both to occur during the time of Jacob’s Trouble. There would be no reason for God’s people to preach and heal in abandoned cities—burned out ghost towns. Christ’s reference to those cities in this context points to a pre-tribulation ministry of preaching *and* healing.

Christ’s words in Matthew 10 strongly suggest that some people of the church of God will engage in a preaching and healing ministry in cities occupied by Israelites in the runup to Christ’s return, probably just prior to the time of Jacob’s Trouble. Conjecturally, this work might end when Christ takes the small remnant of His church to a place of safety—what is left of its people after the severe persecutions waiting in the wings even now.

In this regard, you may want to reference John 9:4. There, Christ associates work with day—daylight—saying that one cannot work at night, which He says is approaching. Some commentators aver that night—a time of no work—fell with the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD. They err, for the Romans certainly did not stop the work of the church at that time. No way! More properly, night in this passage symbolizes the time of Jacob’s Trouble, or, more probably, the Day of the Lord, “when no man can work.” We are to work up until that time, while it remains day—while Israel’s cities are still viable and populated.

Of this work in Israel’s cities, there are some things we know, some we do not know. We do not know its configuration, when it will start, how long it will last, how comprehensive or robust it will be. We do know, however, that the work will generate persecution. Christ makes that clear. We do know that it will be *incomplete*, apparently cut short by the destruction and depopulation of Israelite cities about 3 ½ years before He returns. Verse 28 of Romans 9 may be germane. Importantly, the context of Paul’s comments is God’s creation and preservation of a remnant of Israel:

**Romans 9:28** For He will finish the work and cut it short in righteousness, because the Lord will make a short work upon the earth.

Summarizing my comments so far: In perspective, it appears that Christ is predicting “great harvest” conditions in Israel for an unspecified period of time before His return. What will there be about the environment of Israelite cities at that time which might provide some fertile ground for this harvest? Here, I shall limit my comments to America. Although there are others, I shall just focus on two American realities which might incline some to take the Gospel message seriously, even in today’s secular city, as Harvey Cox used the term in 1965.

1. There is the obvious and poignant element of the pervasive distress America is experiencing, evidenced by high rates of suicide and substance addiction. Without question in my mind, this distress relates to the on-going demolition of America’s religious, educational, economic, financial, health, political, and governmental institutions, all suffering from the rigors of powerful centrifugal forces energetically pulling those institutions apart before our eyes. The

factionalism the press parades before us, in Congress and elsewhere, is a *result* (not the cause) of these dispersive forces, an early manifestation of the effects of these pulling-apart forces. This distress is now only gossamer (like spider's webs) compared to the entangling graphene cables soon to come, as the fragmentation of American institutions eventually manifests itself in disease epidemics, widespread shortages of necessities, and finally civil unrest. We are talking about a meltdown of civil society. (Already, there is not much that is civil about our society.) The distress will become greater and greater. So deep will this distress become that God may use it to grab the attention of some who will heed the Gospel's call to repentance and law-keeping.

2. Have you ever seen so much out-and-out sickness as there is in America today? In the small town where I live, there are five pharmacies, one for about every 2,400 people. Mental illnesses, probably in part the result of increased demonic activity, are rampant in children and adults. Alcohol and drug dependencies of all types are becoming normative at every level of society. The pharmaceutical industry enriches itself as parents dump pills down their children's throats to get them to behave at least somewhat decently. Peoples' auto-immune systems are profoundly compromised, perhaps the long-term consequences of genetic modification of our food staples, the use of food preservatives and additives, the corruption of soils through chemical fertilization, the compromised water supplies, the scourge of air pollution, and the degenerative effects of legal and illegal drugs.

Increasingly, American's of all ages 'enjoy' marginal health. Also increasing is the inability of medical systems to address major gaps in treatment. Often gaps exist for reasons of public policy more than anything else—not because of the lack of technology but because the use of sensible treatment regimens is politically incorrect. Given that state of affairs, God might consider the harvest now to be every bit as potentially abundant as it was in 28 AD, when disease was everywhere and technology was nowhere near where it is today. God, in His characteristic compassion, may create a great—but brief—work of healing in an environment where there is no effective medical care available to the multitudes, as well as a work of liberating those same lost sheep from the oppressive demonic activity that is to become commonplace in the last days. Looked at this way, God might use the healing aspect of this work as advertisement, exactly as He did in Christ's day—to grab peoples' attention. And grab attention healing does.

At this point, let us address the question, "In general terms at least, what will be God's objective of this end-time work of healing and peaching in Israel's cities?" Why will God bring about this work?

I do not believe that the thrust of this work will be growing the church of God—adding members to the body of Christ. I do not think that will happen. Some people might feel comfortable calling this end-time work a forerunning work, like that of John the Baptist's. After all, in the very next chapter, Matthew 11, Christ dedicates more than half His words to the role and importance of John. But, I believe this pre-tribulation work will be quite different from that of John's. For one thing, John's ministry was not characterized by healings at all—at least none that are recorded. So, we need to look a bit more deeply at the question of objective.

Mark's more compact account of Christ's sending out of the Twelve (that is in Mark 6:7-12), makes it clear that the disciple's healing and preaching ministry in Galilee took place not only in a setting of persecution. (That is a given.) But it also took place in a setting of major transition. What transition was that? Well, in the next paragraph, verses 14-29, Mark clarifies that the healing and preaching

took place in the context of the imprisonment and martyrdom of John the Baptist, the last Old Testament prophet. Christ proclaims,

**Matthew 11:13** (*Good News Translation*) Until the time of John all the prophets and the Law of Moses spoke about the Kingdom.

If you read this verse in context, where Christ refers to the multitudes' going into the wilderness to see John day after day after day during his ministry, then you understand that verse 13 cannot refer to John's birth or even to his work, but to his death, or at least his imprisonment. That is, it refers to the time when his preaching ceased—and the people could no longer go out to him. That is what that word *until* means, until his death or imprisonment. It was not John's birth, but his death, which marked the end of an era. There was a change after John. Paul writes,

**Ephesians 2:20** [you] hav[e] been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone.

Apostles and prophets, *both*, and Paul lists the apostles first. After John, God would now use disciples, His apostles, not the office of the prophets, to carry out His work.

Matthew's narrative is topically organized. If you look closely at the more chronological accounts of Mark and of Luke, you understand that this Galilean healing and preaching ministry of Christ, and then of His disciples, took place in the swirl of events around John's imprisonment and death, in a time of transition from God's use of prophets to His use of apostles to proclaim the Gospel of the Kingdom.

Why is this relevant? Because the basic timeframe of Matthew 10:23, about the failure of God's people to reach all the cities in Israel before Christ comes, is pre-tribulation. *That time, too, will be one of transition.* We may not stress that fact enough. Perhaps we need to. We today are just at the cusp of this time of transition. John Ritenbaugh refers to such times as axial periods. With the coming of Jacob's Trouble, the times of the Gentiles will be winding down. No, not over yet, but their days are quickly approaching their end.

Conversely, the time will be drawing near when God will set His hand to seeking out and restoring national Israel, the time He again sets Israel at the head of the nations. This pre-tribulation work of healing and preaching is a necessary precursor to Christ's work of restoring Israel, which will come just a few years later, the work He will be setting His hand to upon His return.

*God's purpose of this end-time work of healing and preaching will be to identify and then cull out a team of repentant Israelites He will mercifully—and, I think it is fair to add, miraculously—preserve through the Day of the Lord, blessing them at the end of that day to be among those He physically uses to rebuild Israel after He assumes the throne of David.*

That is important so I shall repeat it: God will use this end-time work to identify and then separate for His purposes a team of repentant Israelites which He will preserve through the Day of the Lord, using them at the end of that day to rebuild Israel after Christ returns.

That is what we are talking about here. Now, the people harvested during this pre-tribulation work, set aside for God's purposes, will be a subset of those eventually restored, just a vanguard, as it were. Eventually, that restoration will involve other Israelites, sought out by Christ from the four corners of

the earth. (Deuteronomy 30 makes it clear that Christ Himself will do this gathering; He will not delegate it.) They will return to the Land of Promise in a more memorable exodus than the first.

We will not have time to turn to Isaiah 12:6, Zechariah 2:10, Psalm 66, Jeremiah 31:7, Zephaniah 3:14-17, among others, which suggest that at least a part of this vanguard will be in Jerusalem at the time of Christ's return, shouting for joy that He is in their midst. The reference to shouting in these passages suggests a setting during the Feast of Trumpets. The reference to shouting when Christ is in their midst seems to be code telling us that some members of this vanguard will be in Jerusalem at the time of Christ's return.

Incidentally, the concept that God will restore a small number first, then a much larger number later on, is not foreign to us, but is indeed a pattern of God. In our own experience, we know He is reconciling a small flock now, but will lead a much larger number of people into His Kingdom later.

Let me clarify: The harvest of this pre-tribulation work will be genuinely repentant Israelites, seeking to learn and obey God's laws. I am not sure that they will have God's Spirit at this time. That might come later. They will not have had time to qualify as first fruits and will not be resurrected to *spiritual* life at Christ's return. Rather, God will protect them through the Day of the Lord, using them afterwards for His purposes.

As I wind down, let me focus on the whys of the labor-shortage Christ mentions in Matthew 9:37—"the laborers are few." In this prophetically oriented passage, why did Christ say that? Let us get to where the rubber meets the road. Is it lack of compassion on the part of God's people, a lack of love? Do *you* see the needs of people around you—a field ready to be harvested? Christ was able to "lift His eyes," as He put it in John 4. In doing so, He was able to identify the spiritual and physical needs of people of His day because of His profound compassion for them. He loved them.

As we saw in John 4, He commands us, His disciples, to lift our eyes as well. Anointing your eyes with salve, you will be able to see what you may not see now, the vast, the huge needs of people around you. Stated simplistically: Put on your compassion hat, and you will find a level of life which permits you to "believe all things, hope all things," as Paul wrote in the love chapter, in I Corinthians 13:7. You will be able to identify the needs of those around you, in and outside God's church.

Or, is the reason for this labor shortage a lack of faith on the part of God's people? We are all keenly aware of Christ's question, recorded at Luke 18:8. "[W]hen the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?" One of the underlying reasons for the labor shortage may be the lack of faith among even seasoned Christians—but slumbering ones. Now may well be the time to cry out to God, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24). We have faith. But do we have *enough* faith to do what He wants done, to work the harvest in the context of heavy persecution? We need to ask God to intervene, graciously providing us with what we need to serve Him.

As I conclude, let us briefly revisit Matthew 9. We can be sure that our unchanging God remains the God who provides. He is able to provide the workers. He has the wherewithal to set up enabling conditions in Israel, conditions which will permit an end-time work to proceed no matter how secular, no matter how anti-God public policy may turn. We also know God's Word will not return to Him void. Isaiah 14:24 reminds us that what God purposes will stand, what He thinks, He does. He *will* accomplish His purposes. The sovereign God will not be left emptyhanded but will provide the increase He ordains.

While we do not know who will actually execute this work, it is clear that God has given *every child of light in this room* a role in ending the current labor-shortage. There is something each of us can do to become part of the solution rather than part of the problem. And, that something we dare not fail to do. In Matthew 9:37, Christ laments the scarcity of laborers. He commands, in the next verse:

**Matthew 9:38** Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest.

God has told us that there will be yet a great harvest in “the chief of the nations,” in secular, in godless America, a great need, a potential for an abundant in-gathering, according to His will. In compassion, let the earnest prayer to our Great God be daily on our lips: “Send out laborers into [the] harvest.”