

Harvest Field
And
Harvest Laborers
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Harvest Field and Harvest Laborers (Matthew 9:37-38)

"The harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few; pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth labourers into his harvest."

Part 1 — The Harvest Field

SEVERAL distinct aspects of Christ's kingdom are represented in the gospel under the figure of grain, in its growing, ripening, and ingathering.

One view is set forth in the parable of the sower, another in the parable of the tares, and another in the separation of the chaff from the wheat; but the conception here is essentially different from all these. The harvest in this similitude springs not from the seed of the word, but from the root of human nature. The field is the world, and mankind the crop that covers all its breadth. The portions that are safely gathered represent the redeemed of the Lord; and the portions that drop over-ripe and rot on the ground represent those who perish in their sins. This field is—

1. *Precious*, in the very fact that it is a harvest-field. Men, created at first in God's image, and capable yet, when redeemed, of living in his presence for ever, are the fruit which this world bears—the fruit for the sake of which

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this world was made. If you ask a farmer what has been the produce of a certain field, he will not in reply enumerate roots, stalks, husks, and grain; he will answer, in one word, wheat; the other portions of the plant are valuable, not for their own sake, but for the sake of the grain which they bear. Thus the various vegetable and animal products of the earth are the stalks that support humanity; and humanity is the true fruit, for the sake of which our Father, the husbandman, cultivates his field. The conclusion of philosophy, reached through an examination of Nature, without reference to Revelation, is that all creation, from its earliest embryo, pointed to man. All that lies beneath and that came before him was a preparation for his coming. Creation contains abundant evidence that the conception of humanity was in the Maker's mind from the first, and that the purpose of calling man into being ruled all the successive stages of the stupendous work.

An American citizen from the sunny South, travelling once in New England, and holding its rugged hills in contempt, demanded of a native what his country produced. "My country produces men," said the descendant of the Puritans. He was right. Man, made in God's image to be his servant and his son, is the true, heavy, precious head; plantations of cotton, sugar, rice, are merely the stalks which support it. Silk, wool, flax; wheat, barley, oats, are precious only as food and clothing for the Father's family. These articles are not separately reckoned in the inventory of the great Proprietor's goods. After all these things were made, and the world stored with them, its Maker counted his work only begun; it was then that God said, "Let us make man in our image." All other products served only to make the earth ready for the recep-

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IV. The Lord of the harvest presses labourers into the field in answer to the prayers of his people. The request of Jesus possesses a tender interest for us. He who bids us address this prayer to the Father knows the Father's mind, and always does what pleases Him. Let it be settled firmly in a disciple's mind that Christ would not persuade us to say anything to the Father that the Father would not like to hear; and it is certain that the Father loves to grant the requests that he loves to hear. Indeed, it is because he longs to grant the requests that he delights to hear them. There is an encouragement of peculiar power to induce us to prefer the request in the fact that the Mediator between God and man urges us to prefer it at the throne.

But some who hear, and hear with reverence, the word of Jesus, so far from being themselves ready to be sent forth as reapers, may be in sadness reckoning themselves the wheat that is not yet gathered and ready to perish. Yet even in these circumstances he who hears the word of Christ should obey it,—should pray the Lord of the harvest to send forth labourers. Let the first groans of an anxious soul be shaped into this prayer, and the Lord may send out a reaper to gather thee. We know that the Spirit of God sent out Philip from his mission work in the city to a desert place near Gaza, to meet the Ethiopian treasurer there,—a reaper to gather a precious head of wheat into the garner; but I think that silent sable African, with his weeping eye bent on Isaiah's gospel, had sent a petition up to the Lord of the harvest for a reaper; and in answer to his own prayer a labourer was sent out to the field to gather him in.

tion of man. This is the fruit that God values. With this he intends to fill his stores. When ransomed men are gathered into heaven, the cotton crop, the silk crop, the grain crop, and all the crops, will be left behind like stubble, rotting in the field when its work is done.

Human beings are the head of God's creation. For these he formed the green earth, and spread over it that bright sky; for these he hung the sun in heaven by day, and sprinkled the stars like gold dust upon the canopy of night; for these, when they fell, he gave his Son a ransom, and prepared an eternal home on high; over these, when they are forgiven and purified, he rejoices with a joy unspicable and full of glory. O man, reverence thyself! In God's sight thou art precious; be not vile in thine own!

2. It is *plenteous*. So said he who sees it all and knows its worth. We soon become bewildered when we try to realize the numbers of human beings that live or have lived on the earth; but numbers do not burden God. It would not weary him to enlighten every human heart, any more than to send a beam of sunlight into the bosom of every flower. More than ten hundred million live and breathe at one time; and many such generations have passed over the stage in succession since time began; yet the hairs of every head are numbered, and omniscience is not baffled by the account. There may be as many blades of grass in one field as there are persons in Great Britain and Ireland; and yet every one of these gets its own drop of dew, and its portion of colouring from the sun's rays. It is not more difficult for God to care for us than to care for them. One day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. In like manner, one man is with the Lord as a worldful, and a worldful as one man. If the

existing population of the globe were multiplied by a million, none would receive less of God's care; and if there were only one man in creation, he would not get more. We are a great family who have been born into this world, but not too many for the Creator's upholding hand; and if we were all born again, we would find room enough in the mansions of our Father's house. When God's Israel have got through the fire and water, it is "a large place" into which they are ushered as their eternal home.

God has made all these of one blood. He has compassion on the ignorant and them that are out of the way. He will people heaven from every kindred and every tongue. He so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son. The godly should be like God both in the wideness of their view and the warmth of their love. If love be true, the extent of its range will not diminish its intensity. It is characteristic of God's laws and works that while they grasp the greatest they do not neglect the least. The power that balances the worlds in space, sharpens the down on a nettle stalk. If we, the children of the kingdom, be in spirit like our Father in heaven, no extension of range will dilute the strength of our sympathy. He who has learned from Christ to take the whole world within his embrace, loves his own house more intensely than the man who loves his own house alone.

The world, as distinguished from the people of God sojourning in it, may be roughly divided into the three parts—Pagan, Mohammedan, and Papist. Under the term Pagan may be included all who do not know and worship the one living and true God; under the term Mohammedan, all who, worshipping one God, do not approach him by the

surrendered; not unwillingly, but because now his will had been won, and it became both a reasonable and a pleasant service to own the Redeemer as his King. Few, perhaps none, were aware of the conflict while it lasted, for he kept it secret as if it were a crime.

Having occasion one day, after he had chosen conclusively his side, to cross a range of hills on his way to the market town of the district, he must needs pass a lonely thatched cottage where he knew a poor and very old man lay dying. He must go in; he dare not pass by; the groans of the old man would have followed and haunted him. Nor was he unwilling to go in; the conflict now lay with a certain conventional and constitutional bashfulness. Grown now, but inexperienced and shame-faced, he stepped in and stood by the old man's bed, repeated some texts, and uttered some timid words to commend Christ to a sinner. He was about to take leave, when the old man's daughter, herself far advanced in life, and of rough, ungainly appearance, came forward, tamed at least for the time by a sense of loneliness, and with a beseeching look from filling eyes, underneath long shaggy eyebrows, and gray dishevelled hair that hung over a weather-beaten, wrinkled brow, said, "Ye'll pray wi' my faither?" The youth was enclosed; the net was round him; his retreat was cut off; backward he cannot, forward he must go. He prayed for the first time in the hearing of strangers. Such was the instrument that the Lord of the harvest employed that day to come behind one reaper who was hesitating and holding back on the border, and to throw him, ere he was well aware, over that dreaded fence into the harvest-field. It is a long, long time ago; and, God helping him, he is in the field, a reaper still to-day.

reapers forth into great and distant fields, and some down into minute openings, where only those can work who are every day and all day upon the spot.

"The poor always ye have with you," not only indicates a fact of history, but reveals a plan and purpose of the Lord. Exercise is provided for the spiritual life. None shall be able to say that the field was too distant, and that he consequently had not an opportunity of rendering service as a reaper. A man cannot sit at meals in his own family, walk along the streets, or pursue his daily toil on the farm or in the workshop, without passing along this laden harvest-field. Everywhere precious fruit, ready to perish, offers itself to the reaper's hand. Nowhere in the world at the present day can a sadder sight be seen than in the great cities of so-called Christian lands. Great, needy, promising fields have been placed within reach of every disciple of Christ; none should stand idle. If any stand all the day idle, they will not at last be permitted to urge either that the field was distant or that the hirer made no proposal. Work is offered to every one, and the reward is sure. To win souls is both work and wages.

To illustrate the manner in which it pleases the Lord of the harvest sometimes to throw a reaper into the field, I shall mention one example which came under my own personal knowledge.

In a remote rural district of Scotland, a boy passed through a spiritual struggle of several stages, resisting the Spirit with varying measures of determination, in order to keep himself free for the expected pleasures of the world, but never able wholly to silence the still small voice. At length the love of Christ gained the mastery, and the youth

one Mediator Jesus Christ; and under the term Papist, all who, worshipping God and acknowledging Jesus, have added a multitude of other mediators.

Pagans have not God.

Mohammedans have not Christ.

Papists have not Christ only.

(1.) Pagans. We should never forget, in this land of light, that the larger portion of the human race is sitting in darkness. We are not near Christ and not like him if we do not take the burden of this fact upon our spirits. More especially, the many millions of India and of Southern Africa have been thrown upon the compassion of British Christians. In respect to those feeble myriads who are subject to our sway, we are like a rich family at whose door a founding has been laid. That vast multitude, nearly equal to the population of Europe, has been thrown on our hands. When they were sinking in anarchy we came to the rescue. Pushing aside others who offered to undertake the task, we drew the child out of the water. In our hands it is helpless as a child. If she who drew the child out of the water be a daughter of the king, she will bring up the child, not in the bondage to which it was born, but as a prince in her father's house. Alas! we have done little to bring the child up for our Father King. The Chinese, though not directly subject to our sway, have a stronger claim on our compassion. The nation has in time past done them wrong, and Christians in the nation should endeavour to make compensation. We introduced or winked at the introduction of a destroying flood; we should prepare a channel in which the water of life may flow.

(2.) Mohammedans. The region of the false prophet's rule is a study of intense interest to Christians in respect of its geographical position. It constitutes a broad and continuous belt, running across the world from the Atlantic on the west to the deserts of Siberia on the north-east, separating Christianity from Paganism. Observe the skillful strategy of the god of this world. The gross idolatry of the heathen was not allowed to come into contact with the Christianity of the West. To meet the strongest enemy a more ethereal system was pushed forward, and accordingly Christianity and Paganism, previous to the date of modern missions, were nowhere geographically contemporaneous. The foolish idols were withdrawn into the dark bosom of the East, and a line of stronger lies drawn up to cover them from the onset of Christian truth.

When the power of Mohammed swept over Western Asia and Eastern Europe like a lava flood, some Christian communities were embedded in it, like Herculaneum and Pompeii; and these fossil Churches have been found of late by some American missionary explorers. If the breath of the Spirit bring life into the petrified skeletons, it will be a grand sight to see a resurrection of dead Churches, after the silence of many centuries, in the very lands where the disciples of Jesus were first called Christians.

(3.) Papists. The greater part of the nations called Christian have remained under the Roman Antichrist, or are bound by the similar superstitions of the Greek Church. I shall mention here only one feature of the many-sided system,—the discovery lately made and proclaimed by the Pope of the immaculate conception of the Virgin. On first hearing the fact we are surprised that the Papacy should thus expose its own weakness. One would think, if they

of God, and thrown upon the field where their services are needed, not indeed against their will, but by means of their will. They are made willing in a day of power. A secret force, like the force of fire, is generated within the man,—as it were behind and beneath his will. While the man is musing alternately on the Redeemer's mercy to himself, and the need of a perishing world, this fire burns and disturbs his rest. To such a height of pressure the force at length attains that he can no longer resist: he is torn from the fastenings where he had said, Soul, eat and drink and take thine ease, and thrown with a great impetus forth from himself and into the field of labour. It is after this manner that missionaries are made. He works best on this field who cannot help working: "Woe is unto me if I preach not the gospel." The power that throws the missionary into the field is the love of Christ to his own soul: it is divine mercy tasted in secret that swells about his heart, until all barriers burst, and the volunteer comes forth with the old offer founded on the old reason, "O Lord, I am thy servant.....thou hast loosed my bonds."

The distinction between a missionary properly so called, who abandons his secular calling and devotes himself wholly to the ministry of the word, and a disciple who abides in his calling and commends the gospel to his neighbours, although important, is a distinction of detail and not of principle. The Lord has need of both sorts; and the world has need of both. Some portions of the work cannot be reached except by men set apart for the purpose; and other parts cannot be reached except by the silent every-day influence of Christians upon the consciences of those with whom they come into closest contact from day to day and from hour to hour. The Master will send some

were wise in their generation, they would hold by antiquity, and not confess that there are saving truths in religion which Popes for many generations did not know. But when we examine the state of the case, we find they could not help themselves. They are in the power of a law as mighty and as inexorable as gravitation. "Evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse." They cannot fix their doctrine at the present point, although they would. On—they must go, like the fall of a stone or the flow of a river. The Popish system, by the mere weight of its wickedness, sinks necessarily deeper and deeper, until it fall like a mill-stone into a sea of wrath. Priests and people have for many generations been gravitating deeper and deeper into the worship of Mary. In this direction the mighty mass was moving, and it could not be recalled. Any attempt to arrest the movement would have rent the huge bulk of the Papacy asunder. The heads of the great apostasy found themselves in this dilemma: the people with one consent were worshippers of Mary as much as the people of Ephesus were worshippers of the great goddess Diana. They must either forbid the worship or declare its object divine; they must either go backward or forward. Backward they were not able to go, and therefore, making a virtue of necessity, they went forward. They separated their idol from humanity; they declared her a sinless being. Happy Mary! she got safe to heaven before these lies were invented. She rejoiced in God her Saviour, while these her worshippers, if they had been living then, would have told her she was mistaken—that she had no sin, original or actual, to be saved from.

Be of good courage, then; the apostasy of Rome cannot help itself. Further and faster it must fall by an inexorable

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Africa—the vast fields of our overgrown cities in so-called Christian lands—we may rest assured he will not retract or modify his word, "The labourers are few."

A very remarkable contrast is presented in the multitudes that may sometimes be seen pressing forward to the natural harvest. The pressure has slackened of late; but a few years ago you might have seen, any day about the beginning of autumn, dense crowds of Irish labourers clustering like bees about the wharves of Liverpool and Glasgow. On one occasion the master of a Londonderry steamer, on arriving at Glasgow, was prosecuted for admitting a much greater number of passengers than his ship was legally entitled to carry. His defence was that the men rushed on board in spite of his efforts to prevent them, and took forcible possession of the deck. Such were the numbers that poured into the Scottish harvest-fields at that time, and such the eagerness of each man to get a share of the work and the reward.

It is even so: natural wants press heavily, and their pressure is keenly felt. The motive is sufficient to throw an abundance of labourers into the harvest. But a spiritual taste and a divine power are needed to fill with reapers that vast ripe field over which the compassionate Saviour looked and longed.

III. When additional labourers enter the field, they are sent into it by the Lord of the harvest. The expression "send forth" in the English version is feeble than the corresponding term in the original. The word which the Lord employs conveys the idea of force. It is literally "throw out," as missiles are thrown in war into a besieged city. The labourers are grasped by the providential hand

when he distributes the eternal reward lays the emphasis, not on the number of the talents that may have been intrusted to the servant, but on the faithfulness of the servant in the execution of his trust.

II. In the judgment of the Lord Jesus the labourers were few. They were few then; they are few still. We are not at liberty to set aside the force of the word by pointing out that the circumstances are different in our day. Such a prophecy of Scripture is not of any private interpretation. Jesus spake as never man spake. He spoke to his own generation with his eye on all generations. Although, in point of fact, a much greater number of labourers are employed in the harvest-field to-day, the Lord himself would not retract his word if he were now amongst us. He would still say, "The labourers are few." After a multitude whom no man could number had entered by the narrow gate into the kingdom, he cried, "Few there be that find it." A great multitude have pressed in since that day, and yet he would certainly repeat the same cry were he on earth again. His heart is so enlarged toward a lost world that he will complain, Few are coming, until the last man is safe within the gate. In like manner here he would not retract his plaintive word about the paucity of the labourers because one Church has sent fifty missionaries to the heathen, and another a hundred. All flesh is grass; but the word of the Lord abideth for ever: it is true for us to-day. The labourers are few,—few in proportion to the world's need; few in proportion to the compassion of the Lord. As that same Jesus from his throne to-day looks down upon the world, and counts the numbers that attempt to reap the vast fields of India, and China, and

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law, until the jubilant cry be raised by emancipated nations, "Babylon is fallen, is fallen, and shall be found no more at all."

But in a general survey of the field, we must not overlook the portion that lies nearest ourselves. Multitudes of our own flesh and blood, speaking our own language, and dwelling on our own soil, are living without God and dying without hope. As the Lord intimated to his disciples in Samaria, we have only to lift up our eyes where we stand, and we shall see fields large enough to occupy all our energies. The need of home missions has been fully recognized by the Church, and the work of home missions has been fairly begun. The features of this work, however, with its difficulties and its hopes, may be more appropriately noticed in connection with the latter portion of the parable—the prayer for an increase of harvest-labourers. In the meantime, looking generally to the world as the field to which the reapers must be sent, we gather from manifold symptoms that—

3. It is *ripe*. In the days of our Lord there was a divinely arranged readiness in the world for receiving his truth. It ran like the breaking out of waters over the empty aching breast of Greece and Rome. The Master saw that readiness, and pointed it out to his disciples in a tone of reproof. They were inclined to delay; he was eager to send them forth upon their work. Accordingly (John iv. 35) he said, "Say not ye, There are yet four months, and then cometh harvest?...Lift up your eyes, and look on the fields; for they are white already to harvest." Whatever interval might be needed to ripen the natural grain, the spiritual field was ready for the reaper. There was a paining expectation both in Jew and Gentile then, and the

I. As the world's population, living and dying without God, appears in the Redeemer's eye a great harvest-field, ripe and ready to perish, those who in any sphere strive to win souls are, in his eye, as reapers gathering the wheat into the garner. A labourer need not expect to lead an easy, idle life. To eat his bread with the sweat of his brow is a necessity of his condition. Our Father is our Master; and he says, Son, go work to-day in my vineyard. For a reconciled man who possesses the spirit of adoption work is worship. The labour of his hand, as well as the song of his lips, is praise to the Lord that bought him. Christ the Son made himself a servant, and it was his meat to do the Father's will. Christians are admitted to be Christ's fellow-servants; and the more they resemble the Lord, the more they rejoice in their work.

Labourers are not a high class of functionaries. They need not expect to get all their own will as to the times and places of their toil. It is their business not to select the field that pleases themselves, but to labour diligently at the task which the Master may have assigned them. What thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might. The Husbandman may send some of the reapers into a thin and comparatively barren field, where they must bend very low and toil very long ere they get their bosoms filled with corn; and he may send others to a more favoured spot, where with less exertion and in a shorter time they may gather many sheaves. Sometimes, in the natural sphere, a jealousy springs up, and a murmuring breaks out among the reapers on this ground; but in the spiritual harvest there is no cause for complaint: there is no respect of persons with God—"Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life." The Judge of all the earth

Master commanded his servants to strike in while the opportunity was good.

I believe at no period since Jesus spoke these words to the twelve in Samaria were the fields so generally and so manifestly ready for the reapers as they are in our day.

The idols of the heathen are losing hold and tottering to their fall. The Euphrates is drying up from its springs, —the doctrines of the prophet are effete, and his followers do not find their hands. The Papacy is rent from within, and its empty and disappointed multitudes, discontented with the teachers who have cheated them, are opener, therefore, to the advent of the truth. Even the Jews are weary with waiting, and the godless multitudes of our great cities are heaving like the sea in a ground-swell, some with dumb, indefinite desires, not knowing what ails them, but some with the grand old question of a quickened soul, "What must I do to be saved?" No worker needs to wait four months or four days for the harvest. The fields are already white. There is a tide in human things which should be taken at the flood. When the grain is ripe it comes easy to the gatherer's hand. But—

4. It is *perishing*. When vast breadths of land have been sown in spring, and few hands can be found in harvest to gather it, the sight is one of the saddest. So much come to the birth, and not strength to bring forth! The heavy ripened fields are bending and growing black, and falling to the ground. Whatever may have caused the scarcity of reapers; whether war or pestilence or oppression may have cut them down or cast them away, or whether it be mere indolence that clogs exertion, the sight of food left to perish is equally a melancholy sight.

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Seldom does such a sight present itself, for men value the fruit of the earth. They cannot want it, and therefore they make adequate exertions to secure it. We know what hunger is, and therefore we do not waste food. When our spiritual appetites become as keen as our natural, God will get his work done. When it becomes our meat to do the Father's will and to finish his work, we shall be like Christ; and soon thereafter, I suppose, we shall be with him, and see him as he is.

Harvest Field and Harvest Laborers (Matthew 9:37-38)

"Then saith he unto his disciples, The harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few; pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth labourers into his harvest."

Part 2 — The Harvest Laborers

A HEAVY burden lies on the husbandman's heart when he sees his cornfields fully ripe, and knows not where to find a sufficient band of reapers. The thought that the last year's labour and the coming winter's hope may both be lost together occupies and oppresses him. For the fruit he planned and toiled and spent his means; and shall it slip, now that it is so near his lip?

This heaviness of heart the Man of sorrows employed to express his care at the sight of human generations perishing for lack of knowledge. When he lifted up his eyes and saw the people of Sychar coming out in companies to the well, his soul yearned for their salvation as for the reaping of ripened fruit, lest it should drop and be lost forever. "Lift up your eyes," he said to the twelve, "and look on the fields; for they are white already to harvest" (John iv. 35). If the mind that was in Christ were in his people now, there is much in the aspect of the world fitted to stir both fear and hope in their breasts.