

Farming today: reaping

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[0 : 00] Which has the title Farming Today. Farming Today and I choose that deliberately not just to be sort of linking with the radio program but also the fact that we're talking about something which affects us today we have to think about farming today and not as it was in the old days.

How does God's kingdom grow? That was the theme of this short series. What is God's kingdom? What are we talking about when we're thinking about God's kingdom? We're talking about the rule of Jesus Christ in this world and the one to come.

We're thinking about his supremacy. We're thinking about how that works out in the lives of individuals, you and me, how it works out in our society, how it works out in the future.

And the Bible encourages us to think like farmers and there are a couple of passages there that I'd encourage you to just glance at again.

Always find the page number in the bracket at the end. 1 Corinthians chapter 3 verses 1 to 15.

We're not going to read the whole of that. But it's a passage that is strong in the idea that we are all servants involved in God's kingdom.

[1 : 32] It is God's kingdom and not ours. And we have different roles to play. Verse 5 of that chapter he speaks of a man called Apollos. He speaks of himself and he says we're only servants.

I planted a seed. Apollos watered it. God made it grow. That's the picture. It's a Bible picture to talk about the way in which God's kingdom grows.

2 Timothy chapter 2 verses 6 and 7. The hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops.

Paul says, well, you think about this. Reflects on what I'm saying. For the Lord will give you insight into all this. So we're doing exactly what Paul was encouraging Timothy to do, which was to think. Think of yourself as an athlete. Think of yourself as a soldier. Think of yourself as a farmer. And these are all good and helpful pictures. They're good metaphors. They're appropriate metaphors. They're Holy Spirit metaphors.

[2 : 35] Of what it means to be involved in the work of God's kingdom. And it's a process.

Ploughing, sowing, reaping and celebration. We've looked at the first two.

We're looking this morning at the matter of reaping or harvesting. There's the field. Nice field.

Ploughed. Ready for the seed.

The seed. Is ready to be distributed. Handfuls in the past. Great. Great machines now. Distributing seed onto the fields.

A harvest. Comes from that. All seems straightforward, doesn't it? But as any farmer will tell you. It's not straightforward at all. It's a very complex process.

And it's a process that, despite centuries of experience of it, there are many aspects of it that are still not properly understood. Now, I'd like to suggest that in the matter of God's kingdom, this question of harvest is actually a very complex matter.

[3 : 42] How does it actually occur? We could ask a lot of questions about harvest. What is harvest? This morning I'm going to look at those four headings.

Principles. The nature of God's work. Timing. And final accounts. Those are the headings that we're going to be considering. But what is spiritual harvest? If I say that word to a group of Christians, you'll all have immediate instinctive thoughts about what that refers to.

I think for most of us, this idea of spiritual harvest is people being converted. That's what immediately sort of comes to mind as the statement. The church would love to see a spiritual harvest equals more conversions.

But I'd like to suggest that actually the subject, the Bible view of harvest is actually much, much bigger than that. It is conversion.

But it's also changed lives. It is the conditions around us. What you might call the salt and light version of harvest.

[4 : 48] The very sort of stuff that we were praying about just now in our community. It's also about the subject of commendation. There's been a spate of people going up to Buckingham Palace recently to receive their OBEs and so forth.

They receive a commendation. They have been selected to receive an award. And the Bible says that harvest for Christian people is a great deal to do with the commendation of God personally given to his own people.

It's a big subject. And it's in fact so big that there's a real danger of us sort of drowning in the bigness of it. But I hope this morning that we shall get some profit out of looking at some particular headings.

Now here's another problem. There is a harvest but how is it to be measured? It's very simple in farming terms. You go out into the fields. You see the bigness of the field.

The farmer can get out his calculator and very fast calculate how many tons or bushels of wheat or barley he's able to gain from that field. And then he can see it physically within his barns as it's all tied up put into nice roly balls and put into the barns there.

[6 : 08] And he can compute the value, the worth of that particular harvest. But what about spiritual harvest? How are we to measure spiritual harvest?

Just taking that particular aspect of conversion. How about 120,000? Is that a good number?

Do you remember where that number comes in the Bible? 120,000. The city of Nineveh. When Jonah went, one man, on a reluctant gospel mission with a very simple message.

And the Lord brought about a repentance of the whole city. And we are told in that particular book that the city numbered 120,000 people.

120,000, half the size of Brighton and Hove. Fantastic. I think that's a harvest. That sounds like a harvest to me in terms of conversion power.

[7 : 18] What about 2,000? Much less a figure. But still a fantastic result. Day of Pentecost. The first post-resurrection preaching of the gospel.

And 2,000 people turned to the Lord. They're cut to their hearts. They say, what must we do to be saved? How we would love to hear that. 2,000 people. That is approximately the area which we distribute leaflets to around here.

2,000 people. They all receive their leaflet. And they say, what must we do to be saved? We would say that was a fantastic harvest. Wouldn't we?

How about one? I'm thinking of Lydia. Do you remember Lydia? Lydia whose heart the Lord opened.

Lydia, the first apparent convert in Europe. The first one who was encountered with the gospel outside the city of Philippi. The Lord opened her heart.

[8 : 26] And she's especially recorded for us within the Bible. By name. We don't know the names of the 2,000 or the 120,000.

But we know the name of Lydia. Is that a spiritual harvest? Is that worthwhile? I mean, look, it's a tiny percentage of 2,000.

But is that worthwhile? I believe it's worthwhile on Bible terms. Because the word of God says, There is joy in the presence of God over the one sinner who repents.

These are all good spiritual harvests. These are all worthwhile. They all have God's stamp of approval on them. There's nothing about any of those situations where God says, A bit substandard.

A bit lacking. And anyhow, who really knows? What happened to the 120,000 in Nineveh?

[9 : 45] The subsequent history of that city is not very encouraging. His relationships with Israel were dire. What happened to the 2,000?

They made a credible statement. But did they go on? And what about Lydia? So it's quite a minefield, this area, to discuss this idea of harvest.

And is it possible for us to have any real confidence in harvest this side of eternity? Well, let's look at some ideas to do with harvest and some principles.

And I've got a whole raft of them here, but in order to save time, I'm not encouraging you to read the Bible verses connected. But I do want you to be able to see and to know that what is being spoken about here is Bible-based.

Now, the first principle is that harvest involves hard work. And I'm thinking here now of Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 15, verse 10.

[11:00] This is what he says. By the grace of God, I am what I am, and his grace for me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them. And he's comparing himself with the other apostles.

And he's saying that. I don't think he's sort of trying to make an exaggeration out of this. He's just saying, no, I just worked harder than all of them. Yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me. It's a constant theme of Paul in his own life and his encouragements to other people that they should work hard in their Christian lives. Harvest involves hard work.

It also involves doing as well as saying. Galatians 6, verse 9 says this, Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper or the right or the appropriate time, we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.

Let us not become weary in doing good. And Paul goes on to say in that particular passage that we should do good to all men, especially those of the household of faith.

[12:11] I'm pretty sure that has to do with behaviours. It's pretty sure it's about practical issues that we should be a blessing to those around us.

It's about generosity. 2 Corinthians 9, verse 6 says, Remember this, whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly. And whoever sows generously will also reap generously.

There's a relationship. If you put a small amount of seed in the ground, you'll get a small amount of a fruit. If you sow generously, you will also reap generously.

Lavishly. At every opportunity. That's why it's extremely important for us as a church to use every means possible to get the word of God out.

And to do so at every opportunity. And it lies behind our thinking of employing a gospel worker and associate worker.

[13:14] So that we should take every opportunity that these days afford to be able to sow the seed of God's truth in the community in which he has set us. We want to sow generously.

Because we believe there's an absolute relationship between sowing generously and reaping generously. Because the word of God says that. We have to do it with patience.

James 5, 7, 8 says, Be patient then, brothers, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and the spring rains.

Patience is an absolute required characteristic of a farmer. There's a process that can't be hurried. And for us it is the same. And even more so. Because we can't say and predict in the same way as the farmer can in four months time my combine harvester will be on this field.

[14:22] Ben can't say as he's on the book table out there in three months time by the law of averages this person will have started to come to church.

You know that doesn't work that way. We know it every single one of us has very different experiences about what it is to be become open to God.

and the tortuous routes that can take and the setbacks that may occur on route unpredictable.

It needs extreme patience. it's according to opportunity. I want to remind you of the parable of the talents.

Talents being money. And Jesus said the kingdom of heaven is like this. It's like a master giving his servants differing amounts of money.

[15:28] money. And he wants to know on his return what they've done with that money. To one he gives five.

To another he gives two. And to a third he gives one. And to the one who's given five he's gone away and he's managed to make another five from that.

Fantastic investment. You couldn't do it today could you? To the one who has two he goes away and gets two more.

Not five. Not one. But two more. And to both of those and equally so the master says on his return well done good and faithful servant.

You have been faithful with a few things. It's very interesting in the in the parable the wording the response of the master is absolutely the same to the one who got five and to the one who got two.

[16:35] I mean think of the arithmetic. You'd be delighted with the person who got you five.

Because remember it's not their money it's the master's money. But he's as pleased with the one who makes five as he is with the one who makes two.

Identical. The one he's not pleased with is the one who takes his one and stuffs it in the mattress or buries it in the ground. Because he hasn't made use of the opportunity that was given to him. It was an opportunity and the master said go and do something with that opportunity. And this is a very important principle.

That we individually by our life circumstances and by our personalities and by our education and by the way that we are have opportunities given to us by God.

and it is required of us that we should be able to exercise the opportunities that God has given us. Not the opportunities given to your next door neighbour the person sitting next to you because they're different.

[17 : 52] But to use what God has given us in the day in which we now live and to do so faithfully that's a commendation.

That's when the well done comes. It's according to opportunity. And then harvest is certain.

1 Corinthians 15:58 says always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain. It's a very strong statement isn't it?

Double negative. Your labour in the Lord is going to be okay. It's going to give a result. Your labour in the Lord is not in vain. I want you to be really confident of this.

If you're sowing good seed now it is not wasted. This is a big encouragement for all of us.

[18 : 58] Those are some principles we could think of others. I was thinking of the verse in the psalm which talks about those who go forth weeping bearing seed.

I think a lot of church work these days is weeping bearing seed. It's weeping because there's almost an anticipation there's almost a sense of the rejection the lack of interest the apathy out there.

who wants to have this word? Who wants to have this eternal life? Who wants forgiveness from God? Who is God that we should honour him? Well that's the kind of response that we expect to receive in Brighton and Hope.

So we go out in some trepidation and sometimes oftentimes perhaps with discouragement and with some sadness.

We see people who have responded brightly to the gospel and then they just seem to have dropped away. And that is incredibly sad isn't it? So it's a sad thing.

[20 : 13] Well that's another principle as well. It's an encouragement. Even those who go out in that sense of discouragement and tearfulness about this work will bear a harvest.

There will be a harvest. Now secondly this is God's work. We should look at this. 1 Corinthians 3, 6 and 7.

1 Corinthians 3, 6 and 7. I planted the seed Paul.

Apollos watered it but God made it grow. in that single sentence is locked a world of important mystery.

We know about sowing. Paul was very good at sowing. Really equipped. We know a bit about watering. Watering is actually encouraging that seed on by applying the truths of God to the situation to that original seed that's been sown in people's lives.

[21 : 25] Perhaps the seed that God has put in your life is being watered at this moment. But God made it grow.

Ah, here's a mystery. Here's a mystery. You can work 24-7 Paul sowing.

You can work 24-7 Apollos watering. But there's a mystery at the end of it. And the mystery is that the actual harvest is in God's hands.

We can't make anybody become a Christian. We can't make anybody even grow as a Christian. We sow seed, we water, God gives you increase.

God gives you increase. How important that is to remember. How frequently the church of Jesus Christ has tried to usurp that role and position.

[22 : 42] As if there was some straightforward connection between the sowing, the watering and the reaping. As much of modern day evangelicalism which is tainted by this misunderstanding, thought that as long as you create the right kind of atmosphere and say the right kind of words and so forth, there will be a result.

You can always get a result, but it won't be God's result. That's what we really want here. We'll say that Charles Finney, who lived in the early part of the 19th century in America, he had 500,000 converts.

But his philosophy was basically this, that you could persuade people to become Christians. It was just a legal process. It was just getting them so persuaded of the truth of that word that they would, as it were, make some sort of response.

But the sadness was that the vast number of those 500,000 didn't carry on at all, as Christian people. They just fell away.

This is God's work and it's very, very humbling to remember that, but extremely necessary to do so. We need to think about the timing of harvest now.

[24 : 20] There's a very interesting section at the end of the story of Jesus meeting the woman at the well, in John chapter 4, verses 35 to 38. The disciples come back to him and they say, Rabbi, eat something.

He said to them, I have food to eat that you know nothing about. It says in verse 35, do you not say four months more and then the harvest. It was a phrase, it was a saying.

I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields, they're 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.

This is Jesus Christ who sees the hearts of all men and he's extremely encouraged. Something profound and wonderful is happening at this point. And the profound and wonderful thing is this, that the woman went back to the city and the Samaritans, these Samaritan people, rejected by the Jews, outcasts as it were, failures, completely on the wrong strip, spiritually speaking, they start to come out.

They're starting to respond. Could this be the Christ? verse 30, they came out of the town and made their way towards him. It's a lovely sort of pregnant phrase.

[25 : 55] Something is taking place which Jesus can see. These people who have a very poor spiritual pedigree are actually turning to the Messiah.

They're finding the Messiah. It's a seminal moment in the Gospels. Christ. It's a wonderful moment. Essentially Gentile people coming to the light.

And Jesus said, lift up your eyes. See, it's happening. It's taking place. it was happening then. Right there before their eyes.

A miracle, a converting miracle was taking place. Romans 1 verse 13, Paul speaks to these believers in Rome and he says, I planned many times to come to you in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles.

That was his confidence. That as he was coming to them, he was really very confident that God was going to grant a harvest. And he was looking forward to that in the now.

[27 : 14] He didn't spend very long in any one place, did he, Paul? Long is probably Ephesus, two years. But most places he was spending a few months. But he really had a conviction that God was going to bless his ministry and that there would be a significant harvest amongst those people.

So, can we hope that there should be harvest now? I believe we can. In fact, we must. We must have a confidence that as God's word is spoken in any situation, that God at that particular moment can make it live someone's life.

And that they can be turned. and that they can put their trust in Jesus Christ. Well, that's a wonderful hope that's set before us.

And these are passages that encourage us to have that. Of course, the timing could be later. In many places, possibly, yes. Who's this character?

Who's this character? William Carey, thank you very much. William Carey, 1761 to 1834.

[28 : 31] He went out to India in 1793. And he had a first evident convert in 1800. There were seven years, seven years of much hard work and much disappointment discouragement.

He had to move house several times. His wife was afflicted with mental illness. It was a very, very difficult moment.

This man was extremely well equipped. He had a heart for the Lord. He had an absolute ability with language. But it was seven years before one person became a Christian.

There's another character. Probably won't get this one. Same passage of time.

This is Adoniram Judson from the States. 1788 to 1850. He met up with Carey on route to Burma.

[29 : 37] That was his mission field. Adoniram Judson had physically a most difficult life, a most difficult experience. He spent several years in a prison for the sake of the gospel.

He went to Burma in 1813. And the first evident convert was six years later. These are pioneers. These are people well equipped.

You'd look at them and you'd say, if anyone's going to be successful in the work of the gospel, these people will be. But the truth is they weren't. Was that a failure? Was that a failure?

They certainly didn't think so. Because they had a very firm belief in this idea that the harvest is God's work. They sow, they water, but the harvest is God's work.

Were they disappointed? Were they discouraged? Yes. But did they see it as a failure? No. They didn't see it as a failure because they realised that God is sovereign in all these matters.

[30 : 43] And so there is a later about reaping that we need to always bear in mind. We live in the wrong era, don't we? Because we do expect things to happen very, very fast.

It's hard to be patient. We think, well, a year, that's a long, long, long time.

Six years, seven years. Well, where would it be in seven years we might have moved country? There's later.

And there's then. There's then. And by then I mean in the world to come. And here are some phrases. And there are many, many phrases in the Bible that sort of follow this theme.

When the Lord will say to us, well done, good and faithful servant. When the chief shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

[31 : 54] For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ when he comes? Is it not you? That's Paul speaking of the believers in Philippi.

And he's thinking, I've got a harvest among you, but it's going to be nothing compared to the reality, the exposure of all that in the world to come. And I think we should think more about this area.

More about this area. Of what it's going to be like. Because we see in part and know in part, don't we, now. we only see a tiny fraction of what God is doing in his world.

We don't really know what is the effect of our lives, the effect of the witness of this church. We don't really see that. But there will be a day when all these things will be revealed.

They will be exposed, blindingly so. And Paul says, I'm really looking forward to that day. I'm really looking forward to that day when the Lord Jesus Christ will be able to say to me, well done.

[33 : 10] Who are these? These are people that your life touched. You spoke words and their lives were touched. and you lost track of them, lost contact with them.

But actually, God by his spirit was working in their lives. And there is a day of final accounts.

Again, Paul speaks in this language because he did have his eye on the world to come. So we make it our goal to please him. for we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ that each one may receive what is due to him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

We all have to give account. Ministers of the gospel, people who occupy church pews. All of us, every human being, has to give account before God for the opportunities that we've received, for the words that we've heard.

Paul says, I'm really keeping my eye on that. I'm really keeping my eye on that because that's so important to remember. who are we trying to impress?

[34 : 44] Paul had to keep on reminding himself that the one person he had to impress was Jesus Christ. We may have accountability structures, there may be people that we look to and people's wisdom and advice that we value, and so forth.

But that really just paled into insignificance compared to this reality that we need to recognize our accountability to Jesus Christ. We have to give account to him.

That's an awesome thought, isn't it? It's an awesome thought. it's not just going to be like a sort of report sheet system, and we're going to be absent from it.

This is a personal accounting that is going to take place. I end with a couple of thoughts here.

There is sufficient connection between sowing and reaping to keep us encouraged and persisting.

There's sufficient evidence within God's word and the promises and encouragements of God's word, as well as in the history of the Christian church, to keep us encouraged and persistent.

[36 : 01] There's sufficient mystery about the process and timing to keep us humble and needy before God. Which is why praying is so important for us. So what will be the harvest of your life, my life?

What will we have to say on the day when the accounts are put together? will have time to time to have time to time!