

PM John 4:1-42 How long till Harvest?

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[0 : 00] Chapter 4, verses 1 to 42. It is that amazing story which I love reading so much about Jesus and the woman of Samaria.

John chapter 4. Now, when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John, although Jesus himself did not baptize but only his disciples, he left Judea and departed again for Galilee.

And he had to pass through Samaria. So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.

Jacob's well was there, so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. It was about the sixth hour.

A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, give me a drink. For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.

[1 : 17] The Samaritan woman said to him, how is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria? For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.

Jesus answered her, if you knew the gift of God and who it is that is saying to you, give me a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.

The woman said to him, sir, you've nothing to draw water with and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob?

He gave us the well and drank from it himself as did his sons and his livestock. Jesus said to her, everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again.

But whoever drinks of the water that I will give, that I will give him, will never be thirsty again.

[2 : 23] The water that I will give him, will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life. The woman said to him, sir, give me this water so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water.

Jesus said to her, go call your husband and come here. The woman answered him, I have no husband. Jesus said to her, you are right in saying I have no husband.

For you have had five husbands and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true. The woman said to him, sir, I perceive that you are a prophet.

Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is a place where people ought to worship. Jesus said to her, women, believe me. The hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.

You worship what you do not know. We worship what we know for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming and is now here when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.

[3 : 49] For the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.

The woman said to him, I know that Messiah is coming, he who is called Christ. When he comes, he will tell us all things.

Jesus said to her, I who speak to you am he. Just then his disciples came back.

They marveled that he was talking with a woman, but no one said, what do you seek or why are you talking with her? So the woman left her water jar and went away into town and said to the people, come, see a man who told me all that I ever did.

Can this be the Christ? They went out of the town and were coming to him. Meanwhile, the disciples were urging him, saying, Rabbi, eat.

[4 : 56] But he said to them, I have food to eat that you do not know about. So the disciples said to one another, has anyone brought him something to eat?

Jesus said to them, my food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work. Do you not say there are yet four months, then comes the harvest?

Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes and see that the fields are white for harvest. Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together.

For here the saying holds true, one sows and another reaps. I sent you to reap that for which you did not labour.

Others have laboured and you have entered into their labour. Many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony.

[6 : 02] He told me all that I ever did. So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them. And he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word.

They said to the woman, it is no longer because of what you said that we believe. For we have heard for ourselves. And we know that this is indeed the saviour of the world.

And may God add his blessing to that reading of his word. The first I would specifically like us to focus on this evening is chapter 4 of John's Gospel, verse 35.

Do you not say there are yet four months? Then comes the harvest. I just love, as you know, the questions Jesus asks.

All 307 of them. All bar one in the Gospels. With the last question asked of Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus Road.

[7 : 27] When the risen, ascended Lord Jesus in his transcendent glorious light blinds the arch persecutor. And Saul, with his presence, with the presence of Jesus, gets asked that most piercing of questions.

Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? Jesus' questions there and in the Gospels go right to the core of our thinking and our feelings.

And they challenge us and they test us so deeply. They quite take our breath away. Who touched my clothes? Mark 5.

Has no man condemned you? John 8. Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat? John 6. Will you give me a drink?

John 4. Whose image and superscription is this? From this morning. Luke 20. Mark 12. What shall it profit a man if he were to gain the whole world?

[8 : 38] And lose his own soul? Mark 8. In a class of its own is the question born of dereliction. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Mark 15. Each question brings us up short. We really do have to pull into the side of the road before we try to formulate an answer.

And tonight's question is no different. Don't you have a saying, it's still four months until harvest, says Jesus. Jesus. Well, this may not be one of our sayings, but it clearly was a saying in Jesus' day.

We do have a lot of little proverbs or pithy sayings from a stitch in time saves nine, to faint heart never one fair lady, to every picture tells a story, or more humorously, I've only made this letter longer because I've not had the time to make it shorter.

Maybe substitute sermon for letter. Some of our sayings do actually approximate to some of the sayings recorded in scripture. For instance, we would say a red sky at night is the shepherd's delight, a red sky in the morning is the shepherd's warning.

[9 : 57] And that's not a stone's throw away from Matthew 16 verses 2, 3 and 4. Jesus replied, When evening comes, you say it will be fair weather, for the sky is red, and in the morning today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.

You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a sign, but none shall be given it except the sign of Jonah.

Jesus then left them and went away. But there was a saying in Jesus' time, it's still four months until harvest. In our country, growing crops is dictated by the warmth of the atmosphere as well as the rainfall and the days of daylight, the hours of daylight.

In Israel and other Mediterranean countries with a subtropical climate, the primary factor governing crop growing was rainfall.

And that occurred mainly in the spring and in the autumn. So crops were grown to receive the benefits of the spring rains, grew up during the heat of summer before being harvested in late September to late October.

[11:14] And in the Hebrew calendar, the Feast of Ingathering finished on the 21st day of the 7th month, Tishri, usually in October.

And this was part of the divine order, as we have it in Exodus 23 verse 16. You shall keep the feast of ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labour. Okay, so in an agrarian community, everyone knew that the unripe crops were of no use for harvesting, and you had to wait for the sun to do its job.

Common sense, really. So, it's still four months until harvest, wisely points out the futility of impatience. Don't jump the gun, don't count your chickens until they're hatched.

In a way, Jesus' question is rhetorical. It's so self-evidently true that it doesn't need an answer. Don't you have a saying, it's still four months until harvest?

[12:18] Of course we do, Jesus. Just what are you talking about? Well, by way of illustration of just what Jesus was talking about, and this takes us from expository preaching more into the realms of testimony, let me tell you, as I hinted when I was here in January, a little about a trip that Leslie and I, David White and his wife Paula, and four others from Dumfries Baptist Church, made to Nepal at the start of last year, 2023.

Our primary aim was this. A member of our church had been serving in Nepal on and off for many years as a teacher and a teacher trainer, but was retiring from service in the summer of 2023. And we wanted to go and experience her life alongside her there for a few weeks so that we could truly get alongside her here and support her on her return from the country which she loved and where she had devoted her life as she served her Lord Jesus back to living in the UK, the country of her birth.

Nepal, of course, is an amazing, unusual and very underdeveloped country.

It's a long, thin country lying between China to the north and India to the south. It's a buffer, if you like, separating two superpowers.

[14:09] It's twice the size of Scotland in total land surface area, but it's a long, thin country, and amazingly it has six times the population of Scotland, 30 million people, even though three quarters of the country is highly mountainous.

It contains much of the Himalayas and includes the wonderful Annapurna range. We might associate Nepal in our minds with those famous, resilient, faithful warriors, the Gurkhas.

But Nepal was really a country closed to the west until not that long ago, maybe just over 70 years really. And it was ruled for a long time by hereditary prime ministers.

Now that's a strange and frightening concept to us, perhaps, with some justification. But that was the way it was until around 1950. There's been quite a lot of political turmoil since then, a period of monarchy, western influence began to be felt in the year of my birth, 1951.

But since 2013, Nepal has been a republic. The official religion is a Hindu-Buddhist mix, but mainly Hindu.

[15:35] Christianity has been banned, proscribed by the government, but it's flourished for all that. And though officially Christians form maybe one and a half percent of the population, the church is one of the fastest growing in the world.

That's just a wee thumbnail sketch of Nepal. But the timing of our visit coincided with the 150th anniversary of the formation of Dumfries Baptist Church.

And the planning of our trip ran in parallel with the planning of the anniversary celebrations. And those of us interested in going to Nepal met on Zoom with Joy, our sister in Nepal, and we prayed for guidance regarding the timing of the visit and how we could help when we were there.

In the event, a retired cardiologist, a retired sexual health doctor, a retired pastor, a retired engineer, two retired teachers, and a still-working consultant for the elderly, and an oncology nursing sister all went out.

And we were privileged in ways that we could not have planned left to our own devices. We were privileged with opportunities to preach and teach and lecture and witness and by our presence, going with love and care and interest to touch some lives simply by going there at all, simply by being there.

[17 : 20] Our plans were to visit four areas in particular. Kathmandu, the capital, was where we would arrive, courtesy of Qatar Airways, and from where we would leave.

Secondly, there was Tan Sen. Tan Sen lies 120 miles west from Kathmandu as the crow flies, but in fact 200 miles by road, and was a 12-hour drive away.

Yes, the roads were unspeakably awful. We may think we have tourist attraction-sized potholes in Dumfries and Galloway, but Nepal roads are legendary for their awfulness and not without reason. Tan Sen, though, had a Christian hospital with long links to Dumfries Baptist Church, and there we would visit to lecture and to fellowship in their pre-work prayer meetings each morning.

The third area we were to visit was Pokhara, in the shadow of the Annapurna range of the Himalayas. And Pokhara is a world-recognized tourist centre.

[18 : 35] We all wanted to visit, but there were other reasons too. There was a hospital there, Green Pasture Hospital, primarily a leprosy and rehabilitation facility where there was more lecturing to do, and that was such a privilege as it was the fruit of one of the first Christian outreaches into Nepal when the country opened up in the 1950s.

Speaking there felt a little like walking in the footsteps of the giants who'd gone before. And lastly, there was Besisahar, further north in Lamjung province, where Joy lived and where teaching, visiting many primary schools was the main effort, though preaching and fellowshipping was also important.

While all these plans were developing, there came to the evening service in Dumfries Baptist Church one autumn evening in 2021, a locum doctor from DGRI.

There were two unknown faces in the service that evening. At the end of the service, Leslie went to speak to one person and I introduced myself to this chap whose name I thought he said was Stephen.

He was very softly spoken, a very meek man. When I realised he was working in the hospital, I invited him home for supper and we got to know each other a little better.

[20 : 07] Turned out he was a cardiology registrar training in Manchester but doing a short locum in Dumfries. He was a Christian and he'd been praying for years that he might meet another Christian cardiologist.

And he was really aglow when he realised that his long-term prayer had been answered but he nearly went into orbit when we established and he realised and we realised that he was from Nepal and that we were planning to visit his hometown of Pokhara.

He resolved in an instant that we must visit his family and his home church and we were ready to do this taking it as God working in his mysterious ways with his children.

and as he was prepared to go back on duty we exchanged details as you do and that was the point when I realised he wasn't called Stephen at all.

You're not Stephen I accused him. No, he said quietly. My name is G1 but Stephen is one of my favourite characters from the Bible and it was such an honour to be called by his name that I didn't like to correct you.

[21 : 25] Over the next months as G1 visited DGRI again we got to know and meet his lovely wife Priti and daughters Joyce and Josephine and we also were able to help him a little maybe in prayer when his close friend and the pastor of his home church in Pokhara died prematurely at the turn of 21 into 22.

In the aftermath of that great loss when G1 had travelled back to Nepal to comfort his brothers and sisters in Christ there I'd been Whatsapping him with messages of support.

Now I know that the erasure or redaction of Whatsapp messages is a sensitive and controversial issue nowadays with our UK Covid inquiry but as far as I'm aware I've never ever erased any message from anyone.

Anyway I retrieved those I had sent to G1 and I thought you might appreciate hearing one message in particular. G1 had been bemoaning his dryness and emptiness in trying to bring comfort to his bereaved church on this visit back home and I'd been trying to encourage him that it was the self-same spirit who descended on Jesus as a dove at his baptism who indwelt him but then as I was messaging something odd happened let me read what I wrote you know what G1 I never thought anything good would come from predictive texting it usually takes what I want to say and distorts it but two minutes ago G1 as I typed Jesus my fingers slipped and when I tried to correct the five letter misconception it was highlighted with the phrase no replacements found that's

Jesus for you once and for all the only name the unique spotless sinless son of God absolutely no replacement for him fix your eyes on him God bless so these connections with G1 and his church gave added spice to our visit a year later as we were able to spend a weekend worshipping with Greater Grace Church in Pokhara now the other members of our party of eight had other commitments that weekend so it was just Leslie and myself who enjoyed one of the most remarkable weekends of our lives we've never met with a warmer welcome or greater acceptance as Christian family we met up on the Friday evening with Pastor James who'd taken over from the pastor who'd passed away with James' wife

[24 : 30] Elizabeth the church elder Raj and his wife Durga and Charmi Pastor Narja's widow and their families Charmi the widow had four children the youngest four or five years old and was a beautiful gracious sister in Christ carrying a weight of grief and responsibility with great dignity and a calm trust in her living resurrected saviour and we had a blessed time of fellowship as we got to know them all that Friday evening over dinner following day it was our privilege to worship with them and I'd been asked to preach now Saturday is their day of rest their Lord's day in Nepal it was only as we were there in the service that morning that I realised that this was a special commemorative thanksgiving service one year on precisely after

Pastor Narja's death and so the service and fellowship and meal went on from 10.30 to 3pm never complain about long sermons my friends the following morning Pastor James and Raj had invited us to be picked up by car by the two of them before 6am it was yes cold and dark and to take us to a viewpoint overlooking the valley where Pokhara sat to see the sunrise Pokhara mind you is not a town but it's the second city of Nepal with a population of at least half a million people but this my friends was awesome to watch the orb of the sun slowly take shape over the horizon and start to lighten the whole valley with every hue of darkest orange to pink but more awesome still than all of this was to sing together

Raj and James sang in Nepali and Leslie and I sang in English the melody was in common that hymn of praise we sang was from the rising of the sun to the going down of the same the Lord's name is to be praised you may know it from the rising of the sun to the going down of the same the Lord's name is to be praised and we sang this together in different languages and we prayed together in different languages and it was a true mountaintop experience now greater grace church is not that big physically and it's not an old church it was constituted in only 2009 what was greater was the grace not the size of the building there were maybe a hundred hundred and twenty people at the service and we would consider that the church premises were little better than a shed by our sophisticated standards but there they were thanking God for his goodness despite the death of their pastor actually thanking God because he had blessed them with his ministry for so long and had taken him home to be with himself and this in spite of the fact that as we later found out he had been suffering from depression and had taken his own life let's be clear completely clear that such a thing is no different and no more an act of the healthy will than someone dying from a diabetic crisis or a complication of cancer we really must get our heads around the unjustified stigma that surrounds mental illness but here we have a congregation not a big congregation and definitely not a wealthy congregation reeling from loss but with their eyes fixed on

Christ Jesus and practically the next thing we hear when we're back home in Scotland in the February is that they are starting a church plant in a village a few miles from Pokhara this little bereaved monetarily poor congregation is church planting don't you have a saying it's four months until harvest I tell you said Jesus open your eyes and look at the fields they are ripe for harvest greater grace church had heard this plea from their saviour and they'd responded to that plea without equivocation without argument with obedience and with heart Jesus in verse 35 of John 4 is telling us it's not some politician or an administrator or a scientist or a guru or a social media influencer it's the

Lord of glory the son of God the son of man who's our saviour and our lawgiver our light our way our truth our life and the tense he uses is the present tense I tell you so let none of us try to dodge this Jesus is telling us and notice he's not suggesting hinting nodding or winking or even just saying he's telling this is much more emphatic even in our own vernacular I'm telling you boy it has a lapel grabbing in your face approach I'm not suggesting for an instant or implying violence verbally on the part of the Lord Jesus but this was an emphatic comment I tell you and that you were his disciples his followers his pupils and if we follow Jesus it's us he's telling you even as he's telling me we have no get out clause here this scripture is for us just as much as that disquieting declaration in Matthew

5 that we are the salt of the earth and we are the light of the world however much we may wish with false modesty to dodge this accolade

[31 : 20] I tell you said Jesus open your eyes are our eyes shut don't children shut their eyes when they don't want to see something unpleasant or acknowledge the very existence of something they don't want to do for whatever reason how much time do we walk around with our spiritual eyes shut does that comment outrage or insult us or are we like some birds and animals who have a thing called a nictitating membrane a little extra eyelid that comes down in front of our eyes to protect them but leaving some sort of blurry vision so reminds me of that sobering verse in Ezekiel 40 the man said to me son of man look carefully and listen closely and pay attention to everything I am going to show you for that is why you have been brought here

I tell you said Jesus open your eyes and look at the fields this verse is telling us open your eyes and look at the streets look at the shops look at the crowds look at the football stadium look at the concert venue look at the parliament look at the battlefield look at the unbelieving wayward church look everywhere around you the evidence is there of souls ready for harvest are we as unenlightened as the disciples outside Samaria this wasn't religious Jerusalem this was heathen ostracised Samaria but the fields were ripe for harvest so how do we respond to this I must confess I'm a past master at excuses excuse number one well you've actually got it wrong there Jesus these are heathen they've rejected your word these are beyond the pale these are prostitutes eyes as foot soldiers they're goths white witches jehovah's witnesses mormons buddhists they're cultic you can't expect me to approach these

Samaritans with the gospel Jesus did and your timing's all wrong Jesus maybe once they've repented I could speak to them Jesus knew all about timing and timings he knew that his time had not yet come his perfect timing but when it did he set his face like a flint towards Jerusalem towards trial and humiliation and brutal beating and this led to his death for you and me and for all the other sinners I've just mentioned please Lord keep me from using the Pharisees prayer in the temple about being better than others including the publican who in contrast beat his breast and wouldn't lift up his eyes but pled Lord be merciful to me the sinner so Jesus timing was now is the accepted time now is the day of salvation excuse number two

I'll do this but I've got a bad feeling about it couldn't I just sit on the sidelines and watch a proper trained reaper do the business please someone with a degree in reaping or a postgraduate qualification or even someone who's done an online course in reaping excuse number three can't I just pray for someone else to reap I promise I'll pray lots excuse number four can't I maybe just pay for someone to reap someone who likes reaping who has a heart for it and has a good track record may I draw us back to scripture because Queen Esther must have thought if not maybe articulated all these excuses in one form or another but who knows if you and I have not come to our current position for such a time as this if we look in verse 36 in John 4 there

Jesus encourages his disciples in their harvesting work their fishers of men work verse 36 says already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life so that sower and reaper may rejoice together and we're told there in three ways at least there is a great encouragement for getting up and starting to reap the first thing is that their work their harvest work would be rewarded and indeed for the very disciples to whom Jesus first and foremost addressed these remarks we find that in the book of Acts the second thing was the good of their work would last forever harvest a crop for eternal life and the third thing was that every worker in the harvest would rejoice together in the work there's a team working here and Jesus quotes another of these pithy sayings in verse 37 one sows and another reaps and actually the apostle

[37 : 23] Paul picks this up in 1 Corinthians chapter 3 verses 6 to 9 and I'm reading this in the NIV Paul says I planted the seed Apollos watered it but God has been making it grow so neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything but only God who makes things grow the one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose and they will each be rewarded according to their own labour for we are co-workers in God's service you are God's field God's building so faced with the harvest work you wonder do we start to feel sorry for ourselves that we're being called to some onerous task that depends on our humiliation or suffering or embarrassment or being left out in a limb to be mocked let's read

Jesus' job specification for us verse 38 he says and this is the NIV I sent you out to reap what you've not worked for others have done the hard work and you have reaped the benefits of their labour both the passage in Corinthians and this is basically telling us it's not about us at all it's all

about Jesus it's about God it's we have to put ourselves in the way of his will get the wind in our sails and see where the spirit takes us remember the disciples reaction there when they came back from buying food and they found Jesus talking to this prostitute they were horrified effectively they asked Jesus if he would like them to shoo this sinner this prostitute away elsewhere

Jesus said so poignantly I came not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance the disciples must have been flabbergasted at this the Jewish Messiah talking to Samaritans to sinners to a prostitute even and telling them the disciples to open their eyes look look see it for what it is this is harvest time whatever your pithy sayings and let's look at what happened as a result the summary heading in my Bible for verse 39 and following is many Samaritans believe many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony he told me everything I ever did so when the Samaritans came to him they urged him to stay with them unheard of for a Jew and he stayed two days unheard of for a Jew and because of his words many more became believers do you know what while in

John chapter 6 moving on two chapters we read that many of the Jews who followed Jesus after the feeding of the 5,000 in fact all of them bar the disciples fell away from following him because they found the truth unpalatable while we read that we do not read that the same recidivist tendencies were found in these Gentiles these Samaritans and they went on to witness and to evangelize in their own right they said to the woman we no longer believe just because of what you said now we have heard for ourselves and we know that this man really is the saviour of the world one of my favourites phrases from the metrical Psalms in closing comes from Psalm 103

O thou my soul bless God the Lord and all that in me is be stirred up his holy name to magnify and bless be stirred up that's what Jesus questions do the thing about questions is that they're looking for answers so what will our answer be to don't you have a saying it's still four months until harvest I tell you open your eyes and look at the fields they are ripe for harvest Amen let's pray together