

Prayer at Harvest Time: Now

by John Piper

Jesus commands us to pray for the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest, that we may experience a great movement of prayer and a miraculous work of harvesting.

Scripture: Matthew 6:16, Matthew 9:36, Matthew 9:38, Luke 18:27, Luke 19:10

Topics: "Prayer And Fasting", "Holy Spirit Revival"

Description

John Piper preaches about the need for a great movement of the Spirit at Bethlehem Baptist Church in 1982, emphasizing the importance of a harvest time where many people are converted to obedient faith in Jesus Christ. Despite the successes of 1981, the lack of significant conversions highlights the urgent need for a revival. Drawing from Matthew 9:35-38, Piper urges the congregation to recognize the privation among unbelievers, feel compassion like Jesus did, see the potential for conversion, and pray fervently for God to send out laborers into the harvest. He calls for a week of concerted prayer, fasting, and seeking God's power to bring about a great harvest in the church and community.

Transcript

January 3, 1982

Matthew 9:35-38

The question that returned to me in prayer again and again as 1981 passed away was: Might 1982 be the beginning of harvest time at Bethlehem Baptist Church? Might this year be the God-appointed time for a movement of the Spirit which would cause a great earnestness to spread through the church, convicting of sin, captivating our desires, and empowering us for fruitful witness? Might this be the year in which God grants us to see many people converted to obedient faith in Jesus Christ?

God forbid that I should be ungrateful and minimize the mercies of 1981. They are not insignificant. God was pleased in 1981 to bring to our ministerial staff Glenn Ogren, Bruce Leafblad, Gregg Heinsch, and Cory Dahl. Our giving surpassed the income of 1980 by about 14% and was well over budget. Beyond that the Lord put it in your heart to give \$58,000 above budget to Project '84, 37.5% of which has been sent to our Conference mission projects (Decade Growth Fund). In March, we went to two Sunday morning services. In July, we sent 15 people to our B.G.C. annual meeting in Omaha instead of two as in the year before. We had the largest delegation at the Minnesota Baptist Conference annual meeting in Rochester. A new outreach to the children of our area was begun by Carla Christenson (Friendship Builders). Regular

Monday evening visitation teams were formed and continue with an excited group of people. In the early fall we issued a Call to Small Togetherness and now over 150 of our people are meeting regularly in small nurture groups. The first Festival of Thanksgiving was held and packed the church on a Sunday evening for the first time since I've been here. Mrs. Martin began a leadership training series for some of our Lao men and eight of them gave testimonies in English and Lao at the Christmas dinner where some of our S.S. classes served 300 Laotians and Hmong. We began a class called "Starting Over" as a place for new believers to get their feet on solid ground (or for old timers to get a refresher). And finally, 118 people were added to the membership, 71 by baptism. The Lord has been good. It's no small thing for a downtown church to experience that kind of vitality when she is 110 years old. My heart is full, I praise the Lord.

But forgetting these things which lie behind we must press on. The harvest time that I am praying for is something different than what we have experienced. Except for the 61 Laotians, I don't know of any of the 118 new members of last year who was converted to Christ through our ministry. That means that virtually no Americans were brought to Christ and folded into the fellowship through our witness last year. This was not an aberration. There is a symptomatic pattern both at Bethlehem and in our Baptist General Conference. The growth of our Conference skidded to a dramatic stop in 1980 and for the first time in 37 years went backwards. Here at Bethlehem from 1935 to 1945 the church grew from 900 to 1200 members. But since 1945 the membership has decreased until it reached its lowest point in 50 years in 1979, at about 750 members. The main reason of course for the drop is that in the last 45 years the movement of the people has been away from downtown toward the suburbs. Almost all center city churches experienced the same thing.

But you know as well as I do that beneath all the sociological explanations there is another one which could so easily remain hidden after a year of growth like 1981. And the reason is this: we are not winning unbelievers to faith in Christ. People are not being saved and brought into the family of the redeemed. That's the harvest I'm talking about when I say, Might 1982 be harvest time at Bethlehem? Might this be the year when something breaks loose inside of us that sends us out with power like Jesus "to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10)? I don't know if this is the year. As your pastor, I may yet not be broken enough, yielded enough, loving enough. Maybe we will have to wait till 1983. But maybe not. I have a feeling--and I think it is from the Lord--that something new is going to happen in '82. It is not for nothing that the Lord has given me this burden. It is not for nothing that he is overcoming some of my own fears (which I will tell you about next week). There are signs around us that something is in the offing: the persistent and contagious joy experienced by our outreach teams on Monday night, the burden to have power in personal witness which many of you feel, the spreading hunger for fervent and extended prayer, and all the little and precious victories which surely presage some great work of God. There are signs that this may be the beginning of a great harvest like we have not seen for many years. I don't know. God is free in his dispensations of mercy. But this I do know: that before God enables his people to bring in a harvest he pours out a Spirit of prayer upon them. The surest sign that God is about to send power upon us is a great movement of prayer in our midst. That's what I want to talk about today: "Prayer at Harvest Time--Now."

The text of the morning, Matthew 9:35-38 describes a situation similar to ours. It also tells us how Jesus responds to that situation. All I want to do is lead you this week in obeying the command of our Master given in the text.

First of all, there is a need which Jesus finds, a privation among the people. Verse 36: "When he saw the crowds he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a

shepherd." People without Christ are like sheep without a shepherd. They will soon run out of pasture and starve, or they will get lost or caught in some thicket and die. And in the meantime they are harassed, wearied and helpless. Now the unbelievers you know may not seem to fit that description. But if you see them with the eyes of Christ and are not misled by the shell of self-assurance, you will recognize sheep who desperately need a shepherd.

In Minnesota, about 60% of the population claims affiliation with a church. Eighty percent of those are Lutheran or Catholic. The other 20% are various denominations including 1% Baptists. Even if we assume that the entire 60% who claim church affiliation are committed to Christ (which is a very unwarranted assumption), a full 40% of our fellow citizens make no pretense of affiliation with a church. And that probably means they are also without Christ who always moves his people into fellowship. There is the need: these people, no matter how good or bad, are not saved. They cannot know ultimate meaning in life, they cannot have a purified, clean conscience before God, and without Christ they have no hope of eternal life. "He looked on the people and they were like sheep without a shepherd."

Second, notice in verse 36 that Jesus had compassion on them. The word means literally to be moved in one's stomach with pity. Do you remember the last time you felt real strong pity? I remember visiting a missionary friend in Paris in 1978 whose little four-year-old daughter had pulled boiling cooking oil onto herself. She was isolated in a sterile room, naked. And for weeks her parents were only allowed to look at her through a window. I felt tremendous pity while I watched her mother show her pictures through the window and the tears roll down her face. If the pain and oozing flesh wasn't bad enough, the separation was almost unbearable. And I have asked myself and tested myself: do I feel that pity for my unbelieving neighbors, colleagues, classmates? Ah, there's our need. Our need is to feel compassion because of their need. Our need is to care and love like Jesus did. He was so much a man for others! We need to be honest and admit that compassion does not come natural to us. It is a work of grace in our hearts and for that reason the product not of works, but of prayer. "He saw the crowds and had compassion for them."

Third, notice that Jesus saw an amazing potential. Not just a privation found and a compassion felt, but now a potential seen. Verse 37: "then he said to his disciples, 'the harvest is plentiful.'" The metaphor changes. Unbelievers are not only like sheep who are in trouble. They are also like wheat that can be harvested. There is not only privation. There is potential salvation. And if we need the eyes of Christ to see the lostness of people and the compassion of Christ to feel pity for people, then we need just as much the expectancy and hopefulness of Christ that anticipates harvest time. Do you look upon your neighbors and colleagues and classmates and associates with the lively sense that here is a potential saint. It has probably been so long since the Lord has used most of us to lead a person from unbelief to faith, that we really wonder if there is any potential left. We still know from Scripture that there is terrible privation; we still feel some compassion when we let ourselves think about it, but potential? We wonder. Could it ever be harvest time in my life after so many years of fruitlessness? The answer to that question is resounding, Yes!

When Jesus said that it is hard for rich people to enter the Kingdom, the disciples responded, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus seemed to take away all potential for harvest. But actually, what he was doing was laying a new basis for potential. He answers, "What is impossible with men is possible with God" (Luke 18:24-27). If there is going to be harvest time at Bethlehem it will not be because there are so many competent communicators. The harvest we want is impossible with men. New birth is a miracle. Our goal isn't a big church or fancy statistical charts. Our goal is to see God do the impossible through failures like us. That is the way it has happened in history and that is how it will happen again. In God's time, he will

perform the miracle of harvest and it will be marvelous in our eyes. "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and (then!) you shall be my witnesses (harvesters!)

That leads us to the fourth and final observation. Not only did Jesus find a privation among the people, and feel compassion and see a potential harvest, he also commanded us to pray it in. "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few, therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest" (verse 38). The strangeness of this command points to something very important. It is strange that the farm hands should be told to beg the owner of the farm to send out more workers into his harvest. Surely Jesus doesn't mean to imply that God doesn't know there is a shortage of reapers! And surely he doesn't mean that God doesn't care whether the harvest comes in! Why then are the farm hands told to beg the farmer to get more help?

There is only one possible answer. God has willed that his miraculous work of harvesting be preceded by prayer. He loves to bless the world. But even more, he loves to bless the world in answer to prayer. It is God's way before he does a great work to pour a Spirit of supplication upon his people so that they plead for the work. Therefore, the sign that God is going to bring in the harvest at Bethlehem will be a widespread movement of prayer among you people. If in response to this message there is no new movement to pray then I will not be encouraged to expect 1982 to be the year of harvest. I would press on to labor in the word and hope that perhaps after another year of humbling me and purifying me, God might be pleased to answer my prayer. But if in his sovereign kindness, he pours out upon you the Spirit of compassion and supplication and there is a great movement of prayer, then I would begin to count the days till harvest begins.

In summary then the text teaches us these four things: First, there is a great need in Minnesota just as there was in Palestine--people without faith in Christ are like sheep without a shepherd, no matter how goal-oriented and self-assured they seem. Second, we have need of compassion for these people. We need to feel pity for them, pity that makes us earnest and solicitous for their eternal welfare. Third, we need to see the potential of conversion. We must look not to our failures and incompetencies. The harvest we want is, in any case, impossible with men. The potential all lies with God. "What is impossible with men is possible with God." With God, helpless sheep become a plentiful harvest. Fourth, therefore, we must pray to the Lord of the harvest. See the privation of men with the compassion of Jesus; and it turns into a potential harvest to be reaped by prayer.

Today through next Saturday is a week of concerted prayer across our Conference. We are a needy people. There is power at our disposal in prayer that we have only begun to tap. I am praying that all the members of our church apply themselves to prayer this week as you did when your best-beloved was lying ill. There are three invitations I would like to give. Don't say no to any of them until you have asked Christ what he wants you to do. First, I urge every member to fast for one meal a day all week and pray ½-hour a day about harvest time at Bethlehem, for your own heart (that it sense the need, feel the compassion, see the potential and stay fervent in prayer), for your brothers and sisters the same, for the crucial service next Sunday morning, for persons you know outside Christ, and for our conference needs as you see them listed on the back of the prayer week folder. The reason I call for fasting is because Jesus taught us to fast in Matthew 6:16-18 and because saints from OT times through all of church history have sought the Lord with prayer and fasting in times of desperate need. Fasting strengthens your faith by certifying through pain that you really care. Fasting says to God: I want the answer to my prayer more than I want food. I want you more than comfort. I hunger, O God, to be aflame with righteousness and love. If you have never fasted before perhaps the Lord is saying, this is the week. Join us in fasting one meal a day and devoting

½-hour in prayer for harvest time at Bethlehem.

Second, Glenn Ogren or I are going to be in the Conference room from 12:00 - 1:00 every afternoon this week to pray with any who can come for the hour or just 10 minutes. Consider before the Lord whether the effort to join us there one day or everyday would be your way of saying, Do it God. O do it at Bethlehem.

Third, we are going to devote the full hour Wednesday night to prayer and I want to ask something very special. Those of you who do not usually come on Wednesday night, would you make an exception this one week. I know that many of you have compelling reasons for not coming on Wednesday evening. But I am asking that just this once, at the beginning of 1982, we gather in a great number to seek the Lord. If we humble ourselves before the Lord in this way he will do a mighty work through us in 1982.

Those are my three petitions to you as your pastor. 1) Fast one day and pray ½-hour for harvest time at Bethlehem and your place in it. 2) Come pray at noon in the conference room on any day this week when you are free, including Saturday. 3) Come pray for one hour on Wednesday at 7:15. I will be praying for you as you consider the priority of prayer.

I will close with a record of something God did 130 years ago in New York City. It illustrates how God has started every harvest time in history, through the concerted prayer of his people. Toward the middle of the last century the glow of earlier religious awakenings had faded. America was prosperous and felt little need to call on God. But in the 1850s ...

Secular and religious conditions combined to bring about a crash. The third great panic in American history swept the giddy structure of speculative wealth away. Thousands of merchants were forced to the wall as banks failed, and railroads went into bankruptcy. Factories were shut down and vast numbers thrown out of employment. New York City alone having 30,000 idle men. In October 1857, the hearts of people were thoroughly weaned from speculation and uncertain gain, while hunger and despair stared them in the face.

On 1st July, 1857, a quiet and zealous business man named Jeremiah Lanphier took up an appointment as a City Missionary in down-town New York. Lanphier was appointed by the North Church of the Dutch Reformed denomination. This church was suffering from depletion of membership due to the removal of the population from the down-town to the better residential quarters, and the new City Missionary was engaged to make diligent visitation in the immediate neighbourhood with a view to enlisting church attendance among the floating population of the lower city. The Dutch Consistory felt that it had appointed an ideal layman for the task in hand, and so it was.

Burdened so by the need, Jeremiah Lanphier decided to invite others to join him in a noonday prayer-meeting, to be held on Wednesdays once a week. He therefore distributed a handbill:

HOW OFTEN SHALL I PRAY?

As often as the language of prayer is in my heart; as often as I see my need of help; as often as I feel the power of temptation; as often as I am made sensible of any spiritual declension or feel the aggression of a worldly spirit.

In prayer we leave the business of time for that of eternity, and intercourse with men for intercourse with God.

A day Prayer Meeting is held every Wednesday, from 12 to 1 o'clock, in the Consistory building in the rear of the North Dutch Church, corner of Fulton and William Streets (entrance from Fulton and Ann Streets).

This meeting is intended to give merchants, mechanics, clerks, strangers, and business men generally an opportunity to stop and call upon God amid the perplexities incident to their respective avocations. It will continue for one hour; but it is also designed for those who may find it inconvenient to remain more than five or ten minutes, as well as for those who can spare the whole hour.

Accordingly at twelve noon, 23rd September, 1857 the door was opened and the faithful Lanphier took his seat to await the response to his invitation Five minutes went by. No one appeared. The missionary paced the room in a conflict of fear and faith. Ten minutes elapsed. Still no one came. Fifteen minutes passed. Lanphier was yet alone. Twenty minutes; twenty-five; thirty; and then at 12.30 p.m., a step was heard on the stairs, and the first person appeared, then another, and another, and another, until six people were present and the prayer meeting began. On the following Wednesday, October 7th, there were forty intercessors.

Thus in the first week of October 1857, it was decided to hold a meeting daily instead of weekly

Within six months, ten thousand business men were gathering daily for prayer in New York, and within two years, a million converts were added to the American churches

Undoubtedly the greatest revival in New York's colourful history was sweeping the city, and it was of such an order to make the whole nation curious. There was no fanaticism, no hysteria, simply an incredible movement of the people to pray.

Is there a Jeremiah Lanphier among you?

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