

Harvest Time

Matthew 9:35-38

One of the questions that often creates healthy and edifying conversations among Christians is the question of the millennium, the reign of Christ for one thousand years as mentioned in Revelation 20. Specifically, the relationship between the second coming of Jesus and the thousand year millennium. The differences of opinion among reformed Christians are usually labelled, pre-millennial, post-millennial or a-millennial. Does Jesus come back before the millennium, after the millennium, or does the thousand years of Revelation 21 refer to the present age between the first and second coming. So we identify those who are pre-mil, post-mil, and a-mil.

And the conversations are often healthy because this is a secondary issue upon which Christians can disagree without dividing; we can disagree without contention, without disunity. And even in those disagreements, we can learn from one another, as iron sharpens iron.

Our text this afternoon has some implications for that discussion, and it is one of the passages that has influenced my thought and my position about the millennium, because it presents a very optimistic picture of the future success and prosperity of gospel preaching. And my view of the millennium is very optimistic. If you ask me to define my own position further, I would label myself an optimistic a-mil. Yet when I preach on some texts in the Bible, you might think I am post-millennial, as I expect a great advancement in the kingdom of God prior to Jesus' return. Psalm 72 always comes to mind in that regard, with what I believe is a clear reference to Jesus.

Ps. 72:8 "He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, And from the River to the ends of the earth. 9 Those who dwell in the

wilderness will bow before Him, And His enemies will lick the dust. 10 The kings of Tarshish and of the isles Will bring presents; The kings of Sheba and Seba Will offer gifts. 11 Yes, all kings shall fall down before Him; All nations shall serve Him."

That Psalm ends,

Ps. 72:18 "Blessed be the LORD God, the God of Israel, Who only does wondrous things! 19 And blessed be His glorious name forever! And let the whole earth be filled with His glory. Amen and Amen."

That's optimistic! And exciting. As is our text this afternoon, especially,

v.37 "The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. 38 Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest."

So, beloved, the harvest is plentiful. I don't find any reason to restrict that assessment merely to the time when Jesus lived upon the earth. The harvest is plentiful.

There are weeds, to be sure, as we read the parable of the wheat and the tares. And this is what we read,

Mat. 13:30 "Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, "First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn."

Those with a pessimistic view of the future growth of the church would always emphasize the weeds, but it is worth saying, "It is a wheat field!" I appreciate the simplicity of that declaration. There are weeds, to be sure. But it is a wheat field. And, in Jesus' words today, "The harvest is plentiful."

So we gain a very limited peek into the future which God has given us. There will be weeds among the fields. But it is a wheat field that grows. And if you gain nothing else this afternoon, then keep this emphasis in your mind, “the harvest is plentiful.” And that is the message we are to proclaim! It is a,

I. KINGDOM PROCLAMATION.

Look at how Matthew records Jesus’ preaching,
v.35

Jesus went to the Jews first, to their synagogues. He was a Jew, by ethnic descent according to his human nature. And he came as the fulfillment of all that faithful Jews would have come to expect. He was the Messiah, the Christ. And so he goes to their synagogues to proclaim just that. And he calls it,

A. The gospel of the kingdom.

Sometimes we get a little twisted up trying to distinguish the gospel from the kingdom, while here they are so obviously joined together inseparably. So we can’t fully distinguish them from one another. The gospel is a message. The word means “good news.” It is a message to be proclaimed, as the gospel is to be preached. To the whole world. It is a message of good news. And it is, of course, so much a part of the familiar passages that are read at Christmas.

Luke 2:8 “Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. 10 Then the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. 11 For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12 And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.” 13 And

suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: 14 “Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!”

Good news. Great joy! The Messiah is born. A savior. A king, in the line of David. Yet amazingly, the promised Messiah entered the world as a baby boy, born in a manger. We respond appropriately, with the angels, “Glory to God in the highest.”

That’s the gospel. And Jesus himself called it “the gospel of the kingdom.” So it is that with the incarnation of Jesus, the kingdom of God has come! “Let earth receive her king!” That’s the gospel of the kingdom; it is the proclamation of the coming of the king. It is the declaration of the inauguration of his kingdom.

Often we think of kingdom in broader terms than the gospel, but if that is the case, then you really need a broader understanding of the gospel. You see, the gospel is not simply about personal salvation. It is that, to be sure, but it is so much more. The gospel brings the invitation to be saved, to be forgiven your sin and adopted as children of God, and that gospel invitation is the means by which God builds his kingdom. So our individual experiences and the individual blessings of your salvation are all part of a much larger work of God, namely the kingdom of God. And Jesus came proclaiming that kingdom, thus identifying himself as the King.

Thus the declaration of the king and the declaration of the inauguration of his kingdom is nothing other than,

B. The preaching of the gospel.

Again, my point, that preaching is not limited to mere, individualized plan of salvation that a person takes in becoming a Christian. It is much more than the answer to the probing

question that Peter heard on the day of Pentecost, “What must we do to be saved?”

In fact, let me read to you what Peter actually preached, just before he was asked that question,

Acts 2:33 “Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He poured out this which you now see and hear. 34 “For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he says himself: The LORD said to my Lord, “Sit at My right hand, 35 Till I make Your enemies Your footstool.” 36 “Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.”

Jesus is the Christ! Jesus is Lord! Jesus is the King of all kings! That’s the preaching of the gospel. It’s really not about you at all. It is about Jesus. The preaching of the gospel is about the kingdom of Jesus. And so it must be today!

We have such a therapeutic culture today, that what many people want from preaching is something much more akin to medical or psychological therapy. They want a treatment to fix whatever ails them. They want to be healed of all their sickness and freed from all their pain, emotional and physical. But what is needed most of all in this fallen world which God has cursed because of human sin, what we need most of all the preaching of the gospel. In this fullest sense, the gospel of the kingdom. And that really is the best therapy anyone could ever receive, the best help and hope and encouragement in all the circumstances of life. That the king has come!

Think of Simeon, who is described for us in Luke 2 as a man who was “righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him.” Simeon was promised

“by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ.” And so when he saw Jesus, even as a baby, his life was complete. Nothing else was needed. So we read in his own words,

Luke 2:29 “Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, According to Your word; 30 For my eyes have seen Your salvation 31 Which You have prepared before the face of all peoples, 32 A light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, And the glory of Your people Israel.”

What this world in which we live continues to need is nothing less. Kingdom proclamation. The declaration of King Jesus and the inauguration of his new covenant kingdom.

Jesus did something else, didn’t he? Besides preaching.
v.35

We’ve seen this before, and I’ll emphasize it again. Jesus performs miracles to demonstrate his power.

II. KINGDOM POWER.

The power Jesus’ exhibits over the physical world, even life and death, adequately demonstrates his power of the spiritual world. And so he heals diseases in order to prove that he also has authority to forgive sins. That’s the point of the miracles, to attest to his power and glory as the Messiah.

Again, let me quote,

Acts 2:22 “Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know— 23 Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; 24 whom God

raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it.”

Similarly,

Heb. 2:3 “...how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him, 4 God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will?”

So we see Jesus’

A. Miraculous power.

v.35 “Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people.”

That is the power of the gospel. So this is the proclamation of the gospel as well,

Ps. 103:1 “Bless the LORD, O my soul; And all that is within me, bless His holy name! 2 Bless the LORD, O my soul, And forget not all His benefits: 3 Who forgives all your iniquities, Who heals all your diseases, 4 Who redeems your life from destruction, Who crowns you with lovingkindness and tender mercies, 5 Who satisfies your mouth with good things, So that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.”

Without the miracles, without faith in Jesus’ miraculous power, the whole of the gospel loses its power. But with the miracles, with these healings, we see the kingdom come! And we see something very important about the king. Not only his power, but also his compassion. His power is a,

B. Compassionate power.

Yes, the miracles attest to Jesus’ power, but they are also a testimony of his compassion. And we see that here in our text explicitly,
v.36

His compassion was a response to their need, and an awareness of their lostness. He saw them harassed and helpless. He saw them as sheep, without a shepherd. And he responded with the deepest sense of emotion that the biblical language gives to us. Compassion. The Greek literally has reference to the intestines, thought to be the best expression for the deepest of emotional concern and interest.

Jesus say the people, and he had compassion upon them. And that is for our encouragement, even today.

Heb. 4:14 “Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. 15 For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. 16 Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need. 1 For every high priest taken from among men is appointed for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins. 2 He can have compassion on those who are ignorant and going astray, since he himself is also subject to weakness.”

Even more amazing are the words of,

Heb. 2:14 “Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, 15 and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. 16 For indeed He does

not give aid to angels, but He does give aid to the seed of Abraham. 17 Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. 18 For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted.”

So the king is good. The king of power is the king of compassion. His name is Jesus. And he knows his sheep, helpless without a shepherd.

Please think in those terms, especially as you celebrate the incarnation of Jesus this month. It’s not all about sentimental Christmas traditions. Rather, its all about Jesus. And the incarnation shows forth all of this miraculous and compassionate kingdom power.

Back, then, to our text. Notice what Jesus says to his disciples,
v.37-38

III. KINGDOM PRAYER.

The motivation for that prayer is in,

A. The promise of a plentiful harvest.

Again, here is an appropriate optimism regarding the kingdom of Jesus. Don’t miss these plain and ordinary words. “The harvest is plentiful.”

Sometimes, it doesn’t seem that way. From our perspective, from the vantage point of our own lives, it might not seem that way. It might not seem so in North Korea. Or Afghanistan. Eritrea. Iran. Or Palestine. It might not even seem so here in the United States. It is easy to look at the waning influence of the

church in our culture and come to the conclusion that the kingdom is diminishing. It is easy to look at public policy and laws and become discouraged. It is easy to evaluate the declining prominence of biblical morality and worldview in the exercise of government, the obvious decay in the entertainment business, or the anti-Christian bias and prejudice in the presentation of news and journalism. It is easy to observe the struggles of some missionaries, or the decline of some conservative churches, and reach the conclusion that kingdom is not advancing at all.

But that isn’t what Jesus says, is it? “The harvest is plentiful.” So what’s the problem? Obvious, isn’t it?

B. The need for workers.

“The laborers are few.”

The problem isn’t with the wickedness of the world, but the negligence of the church! The greatest difficulty isn’t with the evil that is in the world, but the commitment of the church. “The laborers are few.” That’s where the problem is. It is here, in the church, among God’s people.

So what should you do?

v.38

That’s why we pray so much for missionaries. That’s why we pray so much for church planters, and for other pastors and ministers of the gospel. It is the command of our Lord Jesus. Pray earnestly. Take those prayer lists home that we insert in the bulletin each week, identifying foreign missionaries, by name, and home missionaries planting churches in this country.

So pray earnestly for these things. Pray earnestly for men to labor as ministers and evangelists. Pray to the Lord of the

harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. This is where an appropriate biblical optimism is so helpful, because it motivates! An optimistic expectation of the proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom will mean that we pray for laborers, and that we send laborers.

So pray earnestly. Pray together, when we meet as a church to worship. Listen to Jesus, “Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest.”

Make this a priority as your pray in your homes as well, in times of family prayer and in personal devotions. Don’t let your prayers become routine. Resist that temptation. Don’t let your discouragement cause you to waver in the diligence of your devotion. Just pray. Pray earnestly. “The harvest is plentiful.” You can be assured of that. The very reason that the second coming of Jesus is thus far delayed because God is still saving people. I hope you realize that. The very reason that we have to continue to put up with all the trials and sufferings of this world is that the harvest is not yet completed. The work is not yet finished. The proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom has not yet come to an end.

v. 38 “Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest.”