

The Opportunity of All Time

David L. De Garmo, D. Min.

Part 1

Jesus often used metaphors. One his favorite metaphors compared evangelism to a harvest. On more than one occasion, Jesus described the reality of the situation as an urgent need for laborers. There exists no shortage of “crops” to harvest, but there is a shortfall in the workforce.

And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." (Matthew 9:35-38 ESV)

At first glance, it seems that Jesus is describing a problem. It has often been said that a problem is just the flipside of an opportunity. One can choose. Will you see your situation as a problem to be solved (or avoided)? Or, will you choose to see an opportunity to be seized? I am not talking about semantics, mind games or spin. Our approach really matters. It matters to yourself, and, more importantly, it matters to God.

For many years, Ruth and I lived in rural communities. I am not a farmer, but I have watched the agricultural cycle, up close and personal. Our friends have been farmers and others that work in related industries. One thing that you will never see is a farmer that complains about the inconvenience of harvest season! *The harvest is not a problem, it is an opportunity.* Months earlier, that farmer could not wait to get in the fields, first to prepare for planting, then planting, followed by pest and weed control. Finally, the culmination—harvest time—pay day!

Jesus looked at the many people that came to check him out and saw the same thing—a harvest, and an opportunity. Do you feel the same way about the Great Commission as a farmer feels about his crops?

May I say it again? The harvest is not a problem, it is an opportunity. We are told that more people live on earth today than have ever lived in all of history before us. If the return of Jesus is near—and it certainly is—the greatest harvest of all time lies before us. Follower of Jesus, are you excited, awestruck, and somewhat fearful as this reality settles into your mind and your heart? We are faced with the opportunity of all time—to fill heaven!

The harvest is ready, and it is everywhere. This is our opportunity to tell the story of Jesus. Billions of people will hear and receive the good news, if there are laborers to tell it.

Until the crops are actually gathered, they are not a harvest, just the opportunity for harvest. Seizing an opportunity is rarely easy. In the next post, let's consider how to meet the opportunity of all time.

Part 2

It was New Year's Eve and I found myself engaged in the rarest behavior of all time. Seated comfortably in my recliner, remote control in hand, I quickly clicked in search of... *commercials*. Home before midnight, and feeling compelled to stay up until the New Year arrived, we decided to watch television coverage from Times Square. It did not take long for indignation to rise up inside of me, as revelry and drunkenness was celebrated on a grand scale. Embarrassed by the crassness of the performers, I found myself in search of relief by changing the channel *from programming to commercials*.

The next morning, I wondered if Jesus would have been at Times Square on New Year's Eve. I don't know. But if he did, his reaction would have been far better than mine.

In the previous post, we were reminded that the harvest—a huge one—lies before us. God has offered us the outstanding opportunity of living just before Jesus returns, the most important era of human history. And, the harvest is everywhere. It is global, local, and personal. Jesus promised, "I will build my church." (Matthew 16:19) And, he is beginning to fulfil that promise around the world. But "the laborers are few." (Matthew 9:37)

Until the crops are actually gathered, they are not a harvest, just the opportunity for harvest. Seizing any opportunity is rarely easy. To continue the harvest metaphor, field work is unglamorous, backbreaking work, usually from sun-up to sundown.

When he looked out over the crowds, his heart broke. So confused and aimless they were, like sheep with no shepherd. (Matthew 9:36, The Message)

Israel sang a song that describes the emotional cycle of the harvest. "He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him." (Psalm 126:6, ESV) Missions and evangelism require hard work, no doubt about it, but joy comes from persevering through the weeping times to the reaping times. Joy comes from seizing the opportunity, not from avoiding it.

We begin to seize the opportunity by seeing what Jesus saw. That is what I failed to do on New Year's Eve. Jesus looked full into the faces of those wandering, troubled, and troubling people and saw "sheep without a shepherd." (Matthew 9:36) Some might use less flattering language. The truth is that some of those people were good people. Others were sick or in emotional pain. Many were flat-out sinners, undesirables. The insiders of Jesus' day accused him of hanging out with the wrong crowd.

Remember that the harvest is raw, and may not be pretty. When I was growing up, we had a huge garden. We grew vegetables mostly—corn, green beans, tomatoes, and the like. But the first ripe produce of the summer was always strawberries—red, juicy, sweet strawberries. Impatient, I often ate my first strawberry of the season right there in the patch. You can't do that with potatoes.

The farmer brings in an unrefined harvest. So does the Church. When you look at the potential harvest, do you see undesirable sinners, or do you, like Jesus, see sheep without a shepherd? Are you drawn to them or repelled by them?

Missionaries have always gone to the neediest places, not just the prettiest places. Many go where the response has been positive, and people accept the message in large numbers. Others, follow the Spirit's leadership to hard places, where obstacles are many and where "success" is limited. As a result, some of the hardest, most Gospel resistant places are the places where Jesus, today, is building His church. The sheep are being connected to their Shepherd.

The mission field starts next door. May we look at our neighbor, classmate, or co-worker with the eyes of Jesus. By grace, God has placed him or her in your life, sheep with a shepherd—your Shepherd.

The opportunity of all time... In the next post, we will look further at how we can seize it.

Part 3

We have the opportunity of all time, to fill heaven. Wow! We start to seize it by seeing what Jesus saw, but there is something that we can do, and we can start today.

Pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. (Matthew 9:38, ESV)

The job gets done by *people*. With this instruction, Jesus identifies the workforce as the most important component of the harvest. Before he sent the disciples out as laborers in their own right, Jesus instructed them to ask God to send the workforce. They would need plenty of help to reach the world. The Lord of the Harvest chooses who to send into the fields. God builds the workforce that builds the Church.

If it were left up to me, I would certainly choose the wrong people, like Israel when they desired a king. Tall and handsome Saul pleased the people, but disappointed God. When God chose the leader of His people, he found a ruddy shepherd named David, whose own father didn't see as qualified.

Through prayer, God engages in a wonderful, mysterious partnership with God's people that gets the job done. Our job is to pray for laborers, including leaders. God, then, will call and send the right people to do the work. As a missionary-educator, my call is to go train leaders who will

lead their churches to represent Christ in their communities and countries. We are called to pray. In missions, praying is as important as going.

Do you hear the *urgency* in the voice of Jesus when he says to "pray earnestly"? Opportunities are often described as windows; they can pass as quickly as they appear. Unharvested crops spoil in the field. Unfortunately, the harvest doesn't come in by evenly spaced segments, it all ripens in the field at once, creating at the same time, an opportunity and a crisis.

I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. (John 4:35b, NIV)

We have an opportunity to seize. When a window of opportunity opens, the wrong response is hesitation. Indeed, hesitation can be downright dangerous. Some time ago, a gunman arrived at an airport security checkpoint and immediately began firing his weapon. Tragically, a federal agent was killed. But, it could have been much worse. Just weeks before the incident, the agents had received training on that exact scenario. When it occurred, with training fresh in their minds, the agents knew exactly what action to take and proceeded without hesitation.

The time is now. The harvest is ready. We dare not hesitate.

Start today by praying for God to send laborers into the harvest. During 2014, the Lord has asked Ruth and I to pray this simple, but powerful prayer and to ask others to join us. If you will commit to praying at least once per week, [please visit our website for a weekly reminder to pray.](#)

(Coming Up: The conclusion of The Opportunity of All Time)

Part Four

In this series of blog posts, we consider missions and evangelism using the metaphor that Jesus often used—the harvest. For a farmer and for followers of Jesus, the harvest is not a problem, it is an opportunity. We begin to realize the harvest when we see people like Jesus saw them, as “sheep without a shepherd.” Leaders who care are desperately needed today. But, we do not have an unlimited amount of time to get the job done. We have a window of opportunity that will not last forever.

In regard to the harvest, there are three broad categories of involvement. One way that we can be involved is through *prayer*. In an earlier post, we described the importance of praying for laborers for the harvest. There are many other needs for which we can pray.

Another way to bring in the harvest is to be directly involved yourself. You can *go*—as a missionary, or as a neighbor. As we become laborers in the harvest ourselves, we are the answer to someone's prayers.

One more way to be involved in the harvest is through *giving* financially. Supporting missions and the outreach ministries of your local church through giving remains a great need for the harvest.

At this point, frustration easily sets in. Status quo is not an option, we know that. But we also know that we have limited resources, especially finances. I have been a pastor and I am currently a missionary. I know that pastors want to resource missionaries and I know that missionaries have an increasing need for more resources, especially finances. Missions is not going to get less expensive, or less important. Are we stymied? Absolutely not. The Kingdom is never stymied.

Jesus and his disciples faced a similar situation. The crowds that followed Jesus needed food, which was simply unavailable in the remote location in which they found themselves. Read the story (Matthew 14:13-21) to find the surprising, but simple solution. When the disciples were ready to give up, Jesus pressed them to look deeper. Taking inventory one more time they found one boy with five small loaves of bread and two fish. Not enough to feed five thousand people.

But Jesus blessed it and proceeded to feed every single person, with a pile of leftovers, besides. One boy's lunch became enough to feed five thousand people, when he gave it to the Lord. A miracle occurred that today. If the disciples and the boy had waited for enough to come in, they would have all starved to death. Miracles happen when we do something—of any size—that God can bless. A miracle can occur today. But we must do something more than we are doing today to bring in the harvest.

For the sake of the harvest, consider doing something more than you are doing now. Don't hesitate. Perhaps you can give \$10.00 per month to missions, please don't wait until you can give \$100.00. Let God bless the \$10.00 gift and allow him to increase your ability to give more. If you find it difficult to pray for long periods of time, don't wait—start by praying for a minute or two. God answers short prayers as easily as long ones. Before long, you may find yourself devoting longer periods of time to prayer. You understand—do something for God to bless and to multiply.

As children, we all played hide-and-seek. The “seeker” always shouted, “Ready or not, here I come!” There is no hiding from the harvest. Ready or not, here it comes—the opportunity of all time.