

# Preparing To Harvest

*Sow for yourselves righteousness;  
reap steadfast love;  
break up your fallow ground;  
for it is time to seek the Lord,  
that he may come and rain righteousness upon you.  
(Hosea 10:12. NRSV)*

*<sup>3</sup>Listen! A sower went out to sow. <sup>4</sup>And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. <sup>5</sup>Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. <sup>6</sup>And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. <sup>7</sup>Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. <sup>8</sup>Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.  
<sup>9</sup>And he said, 'Let anyone with ears to hear listen!'  
(Mark 4:3-9. NRSV)*

*<sup>16</sup>You did not choose me but I chose you.  
And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last  
(John 15:16. NRSV)*

## Message 6

### Waiting For Rain

May 16<sup>th</sup>, 2010

Deuteronomy 11:8-17

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### Introduction:

This probably isn't going to be the message that you were expecting. This isn't even the message I thought I'd be giving but I think it is the message God wants us to hear. For the last 6 weeks now we have been talking about Preparing To Harvest. We want to produce fruit and fruit that will last, amen? But a question arises: "To what extent is our fruitfulness in here a product of our wisdom, wit and work?" Does what we do matter, or is this all up to God? Does he bless one and not bless another according to a set of criteria beyond our ability to understand? To put this more practically, in the middle part of this fruitfulness process, after the planting but before the harvest of souls at death or the Lord's return what exactly do we DO? What should we be doing in this middle phase of fruitfulness? Let's see what the Word of God says. Open your Bibles to Deuteronomy 11 verse 8 and following:

8 Keep, then, this entire commandment that I am commanding you today, so that you may have strength to go in and occupy the land that you are crossing over to occupy,<sup>9</sup> and so that you may live long in the land that the Lord swore to your ancestors to give to them and their descendants, a land flowing with milk and honey.<sup>10</sup> For the land that you are about to enter to occupy is not like the land of Egypt, from which you have come, where you sow your seed and irrigate by foot like a vegetable garden.<sup>11</sup> But the land that you are crossing over to occupy is a land of hills and valleys, watered by rain from the sky,<sup>12</sup> a land that the Lord your God looks after. The eyes of the Lord your God are always on it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year.

13 If you will only heed his every commandment that I am commanding you today—loving the Lord your God, and serving him with all your heart and with all your soul—<sup>14</sup> then he will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain, and you will gather in your grain, your wine, and your oil;<sup>15</sup> and he will give grass in your fields for your livestock, and you will eat your fill.<sup>16</sup> Take care, or you will be seduced into turning away, serving other gods and worshipping them,<sup>17</sup> for then the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you and he will shut up the heavens, so that there will be no rain and the land will yield no fruit; then you will perish quickly from the good land that the Lord is giving you. (Deuteronomy 11:8-17. NRSV)

## Out of Egypt

The first thing I want you to see here is that fruitfulness for the Israel of God will come about in different ways than it once did in Egypt. Look at verse 10:

<sup>10</sup>For the land that you are about to enter to occupy is not like the land of Egypt, from which you have come, where you sow your seed and **irrigate by foot** like a vegetable garden. (NRSV)

I told you two weeks ago that one of the struggles we have in deciphering all of the seed and farming parables that Jesus told is due to the very different ways that we do farming in 21<sup>st</sup> century North America versus how they did in ancient Palestine. Palestine is a unique place. In Egypt, God reminds the people, farming was an exercise in human engineering. I'm not sure how much you know about ancient Egypt, but Egypt developed a prosperous, highly advanced society largely because they figured out how to capitalise on the Nile River. The Nile River had its headwaters in central north Africa and it flowed down out of the mountains and ran right through the middle of Egypt on its way to the Mediterranean sea. The Egyptian farmers developed a way of irrigation that was pretty ingenious. They would set up a field beside the river, then they would make a base, like the base of a crane and on top of that would be a long pole. At the end of the pole would be a bucket and at the other end would be a counter weight. So the farmer could easily manoeuvre the bucket down into the Nile and then swing it around to dump out into little channels that would carry water throughout his field. Each large channel would branch off into smaller channels and when the small channel was full, the farmer would move dirt into it with his foot to stem the flow. Thus the phrase “irrigate by foot” in verse 10. It

was simple and brilliant and it pretty much guaranteed that you would have a harvest every year because the river was always there.

Not so in Palestine. Palestine is a land that depends entirely upon rain. Farming in Palestine was a matter of faith. The vast majority of farmland in Palestine was far from any rivers or lakes. If God didn't send rain, then you didn't eat. That's why the seed stories that Jesus told never mentioned watering. You have sowing and ploughing, mention of weeds and rocks and thistles that needed to be dealt with, crows that needed to be kept away and the need for more harvesters, but never any mention of watering. Have you ever noticed that? Well, that's because in Palestine, you didn't water, you waited for rain.

So why are we talking about this? You probably didn't come here this morning for a discussion on ancient farming techniques, so what is the point? The point is that God never wants his people to forget that they are in asymmetrical partnership with him and that relying on human ingenuity will not be our way. Not by might, not by power, but by my Spirit says the Lord.

I think I told you once before that we've been getting a lot of requests for interviews and speaking appearances and all of that ever since we starting seeing large numbers of adult conversions in this place. Adult conversions are very rare in the church nowadays. When little Johnny raises his hand in Sunday School, no one takes much notice, but when grown up alcoholics and crack addicts start coming to Jesus, the Christian magazines and TV. people start coming out of the woodwork. We've had invitations to speak at our denomination's annual assembly, invitations to share our story at the seminary, invitations to go to a whole variety of places and share "the secret of our success". Most of those we have turned down. You see the truth is, we are not a super innovative church. Now I'm not saying that we do church poorly, I don't think that sloppiness is somehow more spiritual than excellence, but I'm just saying, I don't think that the way we do church has anything to do with people getting saved. We have a good children's program, good youth ministry, good small groups and some good community outreach but I don't think that explains why lives are being transformed and slaves are being set free and I don't think that if I went somewhere and explained how we do Family Circle or how Primary Path works that all of the sudden, other churches are going to have the same results. This isn't Egypt. This isn't about engineering, this is about rain and the favour of God.

In Palestine there were two great seasons of rain that were critical: the early rains that softened the ground and made the sowing of seed and the process of plowing it under possible and there were the latter rains which caused the fruit on the vines to ripen unto harvest. There were intermittent, smaller rains between these two, but the fate of the farm hung on the arrival of the early and latter rains.

So I don't want to talk to about our game plan for the space between planting and harvesting as we try to be a fruitful church. I want to talk to you about waiting for rain.

## Waiting For Rain

Open your Bibles quickly to James 5. I want to show you how the physical principal of rain came to be understood as a metaphor for Divine favour and Spiritual outpouring in case you are struggling with that. Obviously we are not primarily concerned with how much precipitation we get here in Orillia, we are interesting in positioning ourselves to receive the favour of God upon our ministry. We remember that the historical story of Israel was held up in the early church as an educational analogy for how we do faith. 1 Corinthians 10 makes that very point:

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea,<sup>2</sup> and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea,<sup>3</sup> and all ate the same spiritual food,<sup>4</sup> and all drank the same spiritual drink.... **6 Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did.** (1 Corinthians 10:1-6. NRSV)

These historical, physical stories about trusting in God for direction, food and water serve as an example for us to follow. Maybe our challenges will be about different things, maybe our faith issue today is not trusting God for our next loaf of bread or our next cup of water, but the principles are the same. There is a way to position yourself to receive Divine favour and blessing and there is a way that leads to judgement and discipline and death. So it is generally with the story of Israel and so it is specifically with this issue of rain. James 5:7-8 says:

<sup>7</sup> Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives **the early and the late rains.** <sup>8</sup> You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. (James 5:7-8. NRSV)

Here this matter of waiting for rain, the early and latter outpourings, is applied to the ministry of the church, so I didn't invent this comparison, it has Divine Scriptural sanction. Flip forward to Revelation 11:

Then I was given a measuring rod like a staff, and I was told, 'Come and measure the temple of God and the altar and those who worship there, <sup>2</sup>but do not measure the court outside the temple; leave that out, for it is given over to the nations, and they will trample over the holy city for forty-two months. <sup>3</sup>And I will grant my two witnesses authority to prophesy for one thousand two hundred and sixty days, wearing sackcloth.'

<sup>4</sup> These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth. <sup>5</sup>And if anyone wants to harm them, fire pours from their mouth and consumes their foes; anyone who wants to harm them must be killed in this manner. **<sup>6</sup>They have authority to shut the sky, so that no rain may fall during the days of their prophesying,** and they have authority over the waters to turn them into blood, and to strike the earth with every kind of plague, as often as they desire. (Revelation 11:1-6. NRSV)

This is a picture of separation, the true church from the false, followed by a return of tremendous power to the witness of the church. There is some debate about whether some of these phrases are meant literally or allegorically or both. What it seems to be saying is that in the latter days, as part of the great end times harvest, a prophetic witness will go forth that will be granted the power of signs and wonders, like those done during the Exodus and that will have the authority to direct the outpouring of divine favour. These prophets will point to one place and say: "Let it rain Lord!" and a great outpouring of blessing will occur and they will point at another place and say: "Shut the heavens, Father" and a spiritual drought and death will occur. What all of these passages seem to teach me, is that the critical issue for us, is not how best to organise our Small Group plan, not how to maximise the impact of our local outreach, and not how to position our church as attractive to the many new people moving into town. The critical issue seems to me to be how we position ourselves to receive an outpouring of Divine favour and blessing. Let's go back to Deuteronomy and see what we find there by way of direction.

## 1. Loving Obedience

The first thing we see there is that the practice of loving obedience seems to invite the outpouring of Divine blessing. Verse 13 says:

If you will only **heed his every commandment** that I am commanding you today—**loving the Lord your God**, and serving him with all your heart and with all your soul— <sup>14</sup>then he will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain, and you will gather in your grain, your wine, and your oil (NRSV)

One of the things that surprises us in today's church, is the way the Bible ties together love and obedience. In modern culture, love and obedience do not belong in the same sentence. The definition of love has changed in the last 200 years and that definition has crept into the church in the last 30 years. Just think for a second about how our grid for defining love has changed over the last 200 years. 500 years ago, there was no dating, there was no holding hands in a bucket of popcorn, or smooching in the back of a car. 500 years ago a 19 year old boy and a 14 year old girl met for the first time about a week before their wedding. The reason for the match was likely not very romantic and probably had a lot to do with joining two pieces of attractive farm land into one. For that 14 year old girl to love her husband, probably meant to keep his clothes clean, feed him hot food, offer him physical and emotional comfort and to share the joys and sorrows of raising children in an era when about half of those children would die in infancy. For that 19 year old boy to love his wife meant to protect her from physical harm, provide her with money and shelter and to share the joys and sorrows of raising children. So if you told someone to "love God" back in those days, they would hear that different than we hear it today. In their ears it would sound like a commitment to some difficult, but ultimately rewarding things. Today, we do love differently. Now it's about hormones, emotions, stolen kisses and butterflies in your stomach. Marriage today lasts about as long as a pair of blue jeans, and as soon as it's not fun or rewarding, all your friends encourage you to bail and look out for yourself. "You only go around once," they'll tell you and "You have to look after yourself". When you tell people today to love God, obviously there is a shift in meaning.

That's why we need to let God define the terms, because he doesn't change. Scholars love to talk about the similarities between the Old Testament covenants and the ancient treaties of the surrounding cultures. Just about every scholar agrees that God structures his relationship with the Hebrews in terms they would be familiar with. He uses the template of something called a "Suzerainty Covenant". A Suzerain was either a powerful King or a powerful nation that would take personal responsibility for the safety of a lesser. So for example, the Pharaoh of Egypt might make a Suzerainty Covenant with the King of Moab. Egypt was a great and powerful country and Moab was a very small and weak country. Pharaoh might say: "I Pharaoh will guarantee your safety and will march to war in defence of you should you be attacked by any foreign aggressor." This would give other nations pause if they thought to swallow up Moab's territory because they would then have to fight Pharaoh and nobody in their right mind would want to do that. In return, Moab would agree to some things, such as the paying of tribute,

offering token worship to Pharaoh's favourite god and hosting an outpost of Egyptian troops. These sorts of arrangements were very common in the Ancient Near East. Interestingly, many of these treaties use the word "love" as the appropriate response of the weaker party. The treaties usually began with a brief introduction of the stronger party and his actions on behalf of the weaker and then would define the "loving response" of the dependent. So it might go like this: "I am Pharaoh, mightiest and handsomest King of the Egyptians. I acted in mercy towards you and rescued you out of the hand of the Amalakites who threatened to devour you and destroy your name from among the songs of men. It was I and I alone who did this and gathered you unto my bosom in peace and security. Now you must love Pharaoh and pay homage to me as your Lord. You will send 500 choice sheep and 1000 spotless goats to my palace on the first moon of every year. You will provide welcome to my soldiers who ensure your prosperity and you will offer prayers to your god on my behalf whenever you gather for worship. If you do this then I will protect you and preserve your families, your fields and your flocks against your enemies. If you do it not I myself will chastise you severely, causing you to perish utterly from the earth. I am Pharaoh, your Lord." That actually would be a rough equivalent of any one of many such Suzerainty Covenants that you can find at a museum. That is why the Law of the Old Covenant is structured the way it is with phrases such as:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; <sup>3</sup>you shall have no other gods before me. (Exodus 20:2-3. NRSV)

That is why the passage we are studying this morning says:

**If** you will only heed his every commandment that I am commanding you today—loving the Lord your God, and serving him with all your heart and with all your soul— <sup>14</sup>**then** he will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain, and you will gather in your grain, your wine, and your oil (Deuteronomy 11:13-14. NRSV)

Suzerainty Covenants in the Ancient Near East were organised around "If/Then" statements that specified the type of love the superior wishes to receive from the dependent in return for the special grace that has been shown. By the way, in case you think this is an Old Testament thing, notice that Jesus said:

<sup>15</sup> 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments. (John 14:15. NRSV)

The New Covenant is still a covenant and it is still based on the same model as the old. The superior defines the sort of love that is required of the dependents. The problem with the Evangelical church today is that we think we are EQUAL partners with God in this relationship; that Jesus is our home-boy, or boyfriend, or whatever, and that WE CAN DEFINE the type of love we wish to render unto God.

We've made a new deal over the last 30 years. We say to God Almighty: "Here's the new deal Santa, you will give us food, blessings, health, wealth and prosperity and we will sing you sappy songs and affix religious slogans on our cars. However, we will not obey your commandments and we will not listen to your Word. That is the best we can offer at this time. Your equal in all things, the Evangelical church." It doesn't work that way and I fear that the Evangelical church in North America is about to discover what happens to Moab when the Amalakites figure out that Pharaoh is not our body guard anymore. I fear even more what will happen when Pharaoh himself comes to chastise us in person.

The Word of God says that if we dependents, we lesser partners wish to be showered in Divine favour than we need to practice love expressing itself in obedience. That is how God defines love: joyous obedience. Love and obedience belong together; they are not opposites as we today make them out to be. This is the love of a child who delights to please his father by doing things that honour and glorify him. God is not looking for heart-less, routine, legalistic obedience, but LOVING OBEDIENCE, the sort of obedience where we know and celebrate that God's ways are for our good anyway, if we love God with joyous obedience, than we position ourselves to enjoy blessings and favour.

## 2. Singular Allegiance

The Word of God also says that we need to commit to singular allegiance. Verse 16 says:

<sup>16</sup>Take care, or **you will be seduced into turning away, serving other gods** and worshipping them, <sup>17</sup>for then the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you and he will shut up the heavens, so that there will be no rain and the land will yield no fruit; then you will perish quickly from the good land that the Lord is giving you. (NRSV)

One of the other things we are surprised by in the modern Evangelical church is how hostile God is towards rivals and divided loyalty but when God was introducing himself, he was careful to tell us from the start that he is not cool with sharing affection:

You shall not make for yourself an idol, ...<sup>5</sup>You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for **I the LORD your God am a jealous God**, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me (Exodus 20:4-5. NRSV)

<sup>23</sup>So be careful not to forget the covenant that the LORD your God made with you, and not to make for yourselves an idol in the form of anything that the LORD your God has forbidden you. <sup>24</sup>For **the LORD your God is a devouring fire, a jealous God**. (Deuteronomy 4:23-24. NRSV)

<sup>14</sup>Do not follow other gods, any of the gods of the peoples who are all around you, <sup>15</sup>because **the LORD your God, who is present with you, is a jealous God**. The anger of the LORD your God would be kindled against you and he would destroy you from the face of the earth. (Deuteronomy 6:12-15. NRSV)

<sup>19</sup>But Joshua said to the people, “You cannot serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. **He is a jealous God**; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. <sup>20</sup>If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good.” (Joshua 24:19-20. NRSV)

That’s my favourite one! Joshua is doing reverse evangelism here. He says to the people: “I don’t think it is a good idea for you to enter into a relationship with Yahweh because you are a fickle people, in today, out tomorrow, and that will not fly with this God, believe you me!” I can’t help but wonder if he would give North American Evangelicals the same advice today. But maybe you think that God was only jealous in the Old Testament; maybe he relaxes somewhat as we turn the pages in our Bibles. Jesus said it even more bluntly:

“Whoever comes to me and does **not hate father and mother**, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and **even life itself**, cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:26. NRSV)

Jesus said that to be his disciple your love and loyalty to him would have to so far surpass all other loves in your life that it would look like you HATED your parents, your spouse, your children and even your own life, so devoted to him and his concerns would you be. That’s a high call from a jealous God. But it is for people that devoted and that singular in their devotion that the blessings, favour and RAIN of God are reserved.

**Conclusion:**

The equation here in Deuteronomy 11 is not very complicated: Love expressing itself in obedience, plus singular, even radical devotion and allegiance, will result in an outpouring of divine favour that will produce a spectacular and fruitful harvest. Simple; yet very difficult. We have some work to do church if we want to do ministry this way. It might be easier to do it the Egypt way. We might be smart enough, cool enough and even lucky enough to build a church of a thousand the Egypt way. It is possible after all. The Bible says:

Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labour in vain. (Psalm 127:1. NRSV)

That verse implies that you can build a house without God's help, you can build a house with the engineering of Egypt and many are doing it. Many are the houses among the people of God that are built with the engineering of Egypt and many are the books and blueprints that will show us the way. But I don't want to it Egypt's way. I don't want to labour in vain. I want the harvest of the Lord because it is way better than the harvest of Egypt. Let me show you something. God describes how he would provide them with what they were looking for if they did things his way, trusting in him and being careful and singular in their devotion. They would receive their plentiful harvest, but then he says, "I will also give you something more." In verses 21 and following he goes beyond their hopes and says, if you are careful about keeping and teaching the commandments:

the days of your children may be multiplied in the land that the Lord swore to your ancestors to give them, as long as the heavens are above the earth. 22 If you will diligently observe this entire commandment that I am commanding you, loving the Lord your God, walking in all his ways, and holding fast to him, <sup>23</sup>then the Lord will drive out all these nations before you, and you will dispossess nations larger and mightier than yourselves. <sup>24</sup>Every place on which you set foot shall be yours (Deuteronomy 11:21-24. NRSV)

There are two extra blessings in there, did you see them? One is that our children will live long in the land. I'd like that. I am so tired of the one step forward two steps back journey that the Evangelical church has been on for the last two generation. We see 50 adults come to Christ but we lose 100 of our own kids to the enemy. We have been bleeding our own for two generations and it has to stop. It's not just true out there, it's true in here. The survey we did a while back reflects this reality. A huge percentage of the people attending here have come to faith in the last 5 years which is great, but how many of us who have been around for a while have grown up kids that are not walking with the Lord? It's a wash. If we had kept our own kids and added the new converts we'd have a revival on our hands. I want our kids to live long in the land, don't you church? And you know what else I want? I want to drive out the enemy everywhere we place

our foot. For years my greatest hurt in ministry was when you would get the seed of the Gospel into someone's heart and they'd show some progress but then old addictions, old bondages would creep back in and steal the fruit. People who showed such promise would fall back into death and slavery and it would break my heart. I don't want that anymore. The Bible says that at the height of Peter's ministry if even his shadow fell across someone they would be healed and the power of the enemy would be broken over them. That's what this passage is promising. If we position ourselves for a great outpouring of the Spirit then not only will we see a great harvest in here, not only will we keep our kids long in the land, but we will DISPOSSESS the enemy everywhere we plant our foot. I want that church and I know of no other way to get it than by the blessing and the favour of Almighty God. I don't have a game plan for getting us there, I'm not smart enough to find that path and I'm not strong enough to make that happen. That is a thing of God - but I want it. I am desperate for it and I will do whatever it takes to put us in the place where we can have it. And all God's people said, amen.