

Prayer at Harvest Time: Now!

by John Piper

John Piper preaches on the importance of prayer and compassion in reaping a harvest of souls, emphasizing that a movement of prayer is the sign of harvest time.

Duration: 40:02

Scripture: Psalm 23:1-4, Isaiah 53:6, Matthew 6:33, Matthew 9:35 - 10:8, Luke 15:4-7, John 10:11-16

Topics: "Prayer"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the need for fervent and concerted prayer. He highlights the great need for salvation among unbelievers, comparing them to sheep without a shepherd. Jesus felt compassion for these people, and the speaker encourages the listeners to also feel pity and yearning for their neighbors and friends. The speaker emphasizes the potential for a harvest of souls through prayer, urging the audience to see beyond their own failures and to focus on God's ability to do the impossible.

Transcript

The following message is by Pastor John Piper. More information from Desiring God is available at www.DesiringGod.org The morning text comes from Matthew chapter 9, not Matthew 10, as printed in your worship folder. Matthew 9, verses 35 through 38.

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.

Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. It was the last time, by the way, that I saw Alma. She passed away last night, and the funeral will be on Tuesday at the Albin Funeral Chapel.

The time hasn't been set yet, so if you know Alma and you want to support the family at that time, you can call the church and we'll give you the time when we know it. The question that returned to me again and again as 1981 passed away was, might 1982 be harvest time at Bethlehem Baptist Church? Might this be the God-appointed year for a movement of the Spirit that causes a great earnestness to spread through the church, convicting of sin and captivating our desires and empowering us for fruitful witness? Might this be the year that God grants many people to be converted from unbelief to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ?

And when I think about what I would like to see happen under the Lord's grace, God forbid that I should be unmindful of the grace of 1981, full of mercies. Let me mention a few so that you can see that we're moving from a position of blessing, not a position of barrenness.

In 1981, the Lord brought to our ministerial staff Glen Ogren, Bruce Leafblad, Corey Dahl and Greg Hynch, not to mention some other paid workers. Our giving in 1981 surpassed the giving of 1980 by over 14 percent, went way above our budget. We will pay all our expenses.

And on top of that, you gave \$58,000 to Project 84, 37 percent of which has already been sent to mission projects for the conference. In March, we began two Sunday services so that the second one wouldn't be pressed. And we continue those to this day.

In July, 15 of our members attended the annual conference in Omaha instead of two, as in the year before. We had the largest delegation to the Minnesota Baptist Conference of any of the state churches in Rochester in the fall. A new outreach to children called Friendship Builders, headed up by Carla Christensen, was begun and is still going, incorporating children into a kind of big brother relationship.

Regular Monday evening visitation teams were formed in the early fall and continue every Monday night to touch the people who've been to our service as well as others. In the early fall, we gave a call to small togetherness. Remember, today, over 150 people of our church are involved in small togetherness nurture groups.

The first Festival of Thanksgiving was held, and for the first time that I've been here, we packed this whole building on a Sunday night and had a great time of praise to the Lord. Mrs. Martin, our minister to the Laotians, began a series of leadership training meetings for eight of our Laotian men. And a few weeks ago, they gave their testimonies in English and Lao to 300 Laotians to whom you, many of your Sunday school classes, fed a Christmas dinner.

We began a class called Starting Over for new believers and leaders of the church who'd like to go back and get a refresher. That's going to begin again next Sunday. And finally, 118 people were added to the membership, 71 by baptism.

It's not a small thing for a downtown church to experience that kind of vitality when it's 110 years old. The Lord has been good. My heart is very, very thankful and full.

We have many causes to praise his name and to say that he is faithful. But forgetting those things which lie behind, let's press on. There's a need at Bethlehem.

The harvest time that I am praying for is something different than what we've experienced. Except for 61 of those Laotians who joined this church, I don't know of any of the 118 people who joined our church who were won to faith through our ministry or were converted through our witness. That means that virtually no Americans were converted and folded into the fellowship of Bethlehem Baptist Church in 1981.

And that grieves me. And I don't point any fingers because I didn't win any. That's not an aberration.

It's a symptomatic pattern. I've been studying the history of our church and I've been watching the conference lately. For the first time in 37 years, the Baptist General Conference skidded to a halt in its growth last year or in 1980 and went backwards.

The first time in 37 years there was minus growth, 166 fewer people than in the year before. Here at Bethlehem, from 1935 to 1945, the membership grew from 900 to 1,200. The halcyon days under Pastor Scholler.

And since 1945, it has been downhill all the way with one jump when the Bethel Church came in and then an immediate plummet until the low point of 50 years was reached in 1979 with 750 members. It's no wonder that people ask, is there really a possibility for turning around an old lady like Bethlehem? Now, of course, the main reason for that decline is that in those 45 years or 35 years since 1945, there has been a constant movement of people away from the city to the suburbs. That's the sociological explanation.

It's happened to almost every center city church. But you and I both know from what I just said about last year that beneath all the sociological talk, there is a need. Something needs to break loose in us, I think, in 1982.

And it's simply this. We're not winning unbelievers to Christ, neither here nor across our conference. We have ceased to be a soul winning conference in the past years.

I don't know what the full reason for this is, but I think I know from Scripture the way out. That's what I want to talk about this morning. That's the harvest that I have in mind for 1982.

When I ask, might 1982 be harvest time at Bethlehem Baptist Church? I don't know if this is the year. I'm not making a prophecy or a prediction. As your pastor, I may not yet be broken enough or yielded enough or purified enough.

Maybe the Lord will have to work on me another year before he answers my prayer in 1983. But maybe not. I have a feeling that we're on the verge of something new.

The feeling, I think, is from the Lord. It's not for nothing that the Lord has given me a burden over the past weeks for my own failure and for the failures of our church. There are signs among us that something is in the offing.

There's that persistent and contagious joy experienced by those teams that go out on Monday night to hold Christ and Bethlehem Baptist Church up before people. There's a spreading sense of burden to have more power in personal witness. I have heard it expressed in prayers and in conversation.

There's a spreading hunger for fervent and protracted prayer in our people. Was it an accident that Paul Goddard returned from his summer ministry and established prayer meetings in that room over there during the early and the late service? And that when our deacons gathered for their first meeting this year, they vowed to be in that room, each of them, once a month to pray for these services? Might that not be a sign that among all the little and precious victories, something great from God is being presaged among us? That we're on the verge of God doing some quiet and widespread work that could break loose from our church, spread to the Minnesota Conference, and then across the Baptist General Conference? There are signs that this may be the year of the harvest time at Bethlehem after years and years and years of decline. I don't know.

God is free. He can pour out his blessing when and where he will. But this I know.

Before he brings a harvest, he brings people first to their knees, asking for the harvest. The surest sign that God is going to make 1982 harvest time at Bethlehem is that a widespread movement of prayer

happens among us. And that's what I want to talk about, prayer at harvest time now.

And the text is Matthew 9, 35 to 38, and I'd like you to look at it with me. It describes a situation not unlike ours, if we have the eyes to see it, and Jesus' response to that situation. And I think if we see his response, we'll have a great clue as to how to act in our situation.

And all I want to do is lead you this week in obeying the command of Jesus in this text. Let's notice four things. 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.

Soon they are going to run out of pasture and starve, or they're going to get caught in a big thicket or get lost somewhere out in the dark and they're going to die. And in the meantime, they are harassed and helpless and tormented. And I know that the unbelievers, you know, may not look like that on the outside.

They don't look like sheep. They look more like stallions, perhaps. But if you see them with the eyes of Jesus and don't get deluded by that shell of self-assurance, they're just sheep.

They're just lost sheep with no connection with their Maker and their Redeemer. In Minnesota, there are 60% of the population who claim any affiliation with a church. 60%.

Among that 60%, 80% are Catholic or Lutheran. The other 20% of that 60% are other denominations, 1% of which are Baptists. Now, supposing, assuming that all 60% of those who claim affiliation with the church are born again and committed to Christ, which is a stupid assumption, that means that 40% of our fellow citizens make no pretense of being affiliated with a church.

And therefore, very likely, do not have any saving relationship with Jesus, because Jesus always draws his people into fellowship with the church. That's the need. And most of them are here in Minneapolis and St. Paul, probably not out in the boondocks.

There is a need. These people, no matter how good or bad with whom you associate, are lost. They are not saved.

They don't have any ultimate meaning in life, being cut off from the one who can give meaning. They can't have a purified, cleansed, and pure and free conscience before God and go to bed free and justified at night. And without Christ, they can't have any hope of eternal life.

Death stares them in the face either as an awful cut off to their pleasure or as a prospect of doom, depending on what they believe about life to come. He looked on the people and they were like sheep without a shepherd. That's number one.

Second thing to notice in verse 36 is that Jesus had compassion on them. The word means literally, he felt pity in his stomach for them. Can you remember the last time that you felt real strong pity for somebody? Maybe just an animal or somebody? I remember in 1978, I visited a missionary friend in Paris.

And their little four-year-old daughter, two weeks before, had reached up on the stove and pulled over boiling cooking oil onto herself. And she was in the hospital. And for those two weeks, she was just covered like this with welts and blisters.

And she could not be with her parents. It was totally sterile room, cut off from her parents. And I remember standing there at that window as her mommy tried to reach her and showed her pictures with this book.

And tears streaming down her face. I felt so much pity. I wanted to smash that window.

I wanted to wipe away all that oozing flesh. I wanted to do something. I couldn't.

And I've tested myself again and again since then. Do I ever feel pity and compassion like that for people who one day are going to be cut off from Christ? A much worse severing. There's our need.

That's my need, isn't it? To feel compassion for people who have need. Great, tremendous need. A need every bit as great as that little girl and her mommy.

Jesus was so much a man for others. Oh, I want to be like Jesus more than I am. Living for others all the time.

Reaching out. Going for their blessing and not just his own. We need to be honest and admit that we don't feel that naturally.

Let's just admit it. It doesn't come natural. To feel that kind of heart-wrenching pity for unbelievers.

And so having admitted it and been honest, then the agenda is set for us. We've got to pray. That's a miracle.

It's a work of grace on our hearts. We've got to ask God, do something to my heart. And I've been praying that for months.

Break my heart for my neighbor Alan McCook. I'm going to tell you about that next week in more detail. 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. If he'd stopped there, we'd all be just frustrated and guilty.

But he saw a potential. Verse 37. Then he said to his disciples, the harvest is plentiful.

Notice the metaphor changes. Not sheep anymore, but wheat. Not helpless and harassed, but a plentiful harvest ready to be reaped.

If we need the eyes of Christ to see need. And if we need the compassion of Christ to feel pity. Oh, how we need the expectancy and the hopefulness of Christ to anticipate harvest time.

Do you look upon your neighbors, the ones you've seen a hundred times. And your work associates and your transportation partners and your classmates. Do you look upon them as potential saints.

And really believe in your heart, it could happen. They could be changed by the work of God through the ministry of the gospel. It's probably been so long since most of us in this room have led a person from unbelief to faith.

That we wonder if there's any hope for us. We felt guilty so many times and looked back on so many missed opportunities. And experienced so many years of barrenness and fruitlessness.

We just bow in prayer and say, well, Lord, maybe there's no hope for me. Maybe that's just not my gift and I never will bring any fruit or sheaves with me into the kingdom. We still know from scripture that there's need.

Every now and then when we let our hearts go out, we still feel some compassion. But potential? We wonder. We wonder whether Bethlehem, after 35 years of decline in membership, could really turn around.

Could really grow. And not just by attracting discontent members from other churches, but by winning unbelievers to light and glory and salvation. We wonder whether it can be.

And my answer to the question is, yes, it can be. And here's the way my heart has been assured this week. The Lord directed me to a text.

You remember it very clearly. It was the time when the rich young ruler was sent away because he wouldn't give up his wealth. And Jesus drew the amazing conclusion that devastated the disciples.

It is very hard for the rich to enter the kingdom. And they said, well, then who can be saved? It looked as if Jesus had taken away all potential. Who can be saved? If it's hard for the rich, then it's hard for everybody because we all love money.

How can we ever hope to reap a harvest? But Jesus wasn't taking away potential. He was shifting the base. You know what he responded? With men, it is impossible, but not with God.

What is impossible with men is possible with God. Luke 18, 27. If there's going to be a harvest time at Bethlehem, it will not be because there are so many competent communicators among us.

There aren't many competent communicators, neither on the staff nor in the laity. That won't be the reason it happens. That never is the reason it happens.

The harvest we want is impossible for men. New birth is a miracle. We can't do it on our own.

The goal we have for ourselves is not a big church or fancy statistical charts. We're asking the Lord to do the impossible through failures like us. Just bring people from darkness to light, Lord.

Use us. That's the goal for 1982. That's the harvest.

Now, that's the way it's happened through history. Every time there's been a breaking out of something new in the church, a reviving of powerful witness and conversion, it's happened through the laity being mobilized, not through one or two singular gifted people. It's been massive movements of prayer.

In God's time, he's going to perform a miracle of harvest at Bethlehem. I don't know if it's 1982. I'm praying earnestly that it's 1982.

The need is great. The harvest is white and ready. Jesus said, you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.

And then and not until then, you will be my witnesses. That power is not in us at Bethlehem. For the most part, that leads us to point for namely.

Not only did Jesus find a privation. Among the people, not only did he feel compassion. Not only did he see a potential harvest.

He commanded us to pray. The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Therefore, pray, pray, pray to the Lord of the harvest that he send out workers.

Now, that command is very strange. It is very strange. And the strangest the strangeness conceals something tremendously important.

Is it not strange that Jesus should tell the farm hands, the disciples. To go to the farm owner and beg the farm owner to send out workers into his harvest. Does Jesus think that the owner of the farm doesn't know that there's a shortage? If Jesus knows, God knows.

Does Jesus think that the owner of the farm doesn't care about the harvest? If Jesus cares, God cares. So why tell the farm hands to beg the farm owner send more workers so we can get the harvest. Or make me a worker so that we can get the harvest.

I only know one answer to that question. Why? And it's this. God has willed that his miraculous work of harvesting always be preceded by a movement of prayer.

He loves to bless the world. But he loves something even more. He loves to bless the world through prayer.

It is God's way before he does a great work to pour out a spirit of supplication and compassion upon his people. And therefore, the sign of whether 1982 will be the harvest time at Bethlehem is whether or not, in response to this message, there is a movement of prayer among us at Bethlehem Baptist Church. If, in response to this message, there is no movement of prayer, I will not be encouraged to think that this is the God-appointed time.

I will devote myself to the ministry of the word and hope that perhaps after another year of humbling and breaking and purifying, the Lord might then be pleased to answer my prayer. But if in his sovereign kindness, this is the year. Then I will count the days till harvest time begins.

So in summary, looking back at our text now, it teaches four things. First, there is a great need. Minnesota is just like Palestine.

There are massive numbers of unbelievers. We see them. We live near them.

We work near them. They need Jesus or they will be lost forever. Second.

Jesus felt compassion. And so should we. We should pity them.

We should feel sorry for them. We should not look with disgust upon them. But great yearning should fill our hearts as we see our neighbors and friends.

Third, we need to see potential. We need to forget that we are failures and look away from ourselves to the great God who does what is impossible for failures and guilt ridden people like us. And fourth, we've got to pray.

There has got to be a movement of prayer. See the privation of man with the compassion of Jesus, and it becomes a potential harvest to be reaped by prayer. Those are the four points of the text.

Now, let me apply it to us in this week. A week of prayer across our conference from today through Saturday of this week across the whole Baptist General Conference. We are declaring a week of concerted and fervent prayer.

We are a needy, needy people. There is power at our disposal that we have not yet begun to tap. If we would be earnest and fervent in prayer alone and together.

And I'm praying that everybody in this room and all those who hear this message today will pray this week for harvest time. Like that time you prayed when your best beloved was in the hospital. Remember that time? And I'm going to ask you to do three things or one of the three things or any that the Lord lays on your heart.

And as I mentioned these three things, don't say yes or no until you've consulted with the master. We're going to have a time of prayer at the end. First, I urge every one of you to join me and the staff in fasting one meal a day.

And praying one half hour for harvest time at Bethlehem for your own soul. That the compassion would fall, that you could see the need, that you would feel the potential and that you would persist in prayer. That you would pray it not only for yourself, but all these others.

And for me as your pastor, I'm in great need of your prayers. That you would remember names from your neighbors and your associates and your classmates. And hold them up to God and ask him to do a miracle that he hasn't done for a long time in your life.

And for our conference, some of you perhaps receive these prayer folders that we'll be looking at this week. There's a place in here for adoration and confession and thanksgiving and supplication. If you don't have one, they're available in the lobby downstairs.

And the needs of our conference on the back. The second thing that I'm going to ask you to do, or before that, let me tell you why I want you to fast. Some of you may have never fasted before.

Some of you have told me that you haven't. And yet I'm asking you to fast one meal a week. Usually the middle day meal is the easiest.

The reason is this. Jesus commanded us to fast in Matthew 6 verses 16 to 18. Second, saints have fasted from the Old Testament times right on up to this present day.

Every time they have felt a desperate need. And that's going to be the clue. Do we feel it or don't we feel it? That'll be the test.

If we feel it, I think we'll be inclined to fast and pray. Fasting strengthens faith because it certifies to us that we really care. It says to God, Lord, I want the answer to my prayer more than I want comfort.

I want you more than I want food. I want a movement of this of the spirit in this place more than I want the feeling of my stomach and that gnawing to be taken away that I feel about four o'clock in the afternoon. Turn fasting into a gift to God and a demonstration to him of how much you care and then join us.

Second thing, Glenn Ogren and I are going to be or one of us will be in the conference room from 12 o'clock to one o'clock every day praying. And we want any of you who are free over that noon hour to come and be with us. If we have to overflow and go to another room, I'd be very happy.

That's a nice room. We can sit around a table. If you can come for just 10 minutes, come.

If you can come for the whole hour, come. That kind of meeting has caused great things to happen in the church. See if the Lord wouldn't have you spend 15 minutes on the road coming, half an hour praying, 15 minutes on the road going as a way of saying, Lord, I'm willing to trouble myself enough to say, do it at Bethlehem, make it happen here.

That's what my driving means. And then third, Wednesday night, we're going to devote the whole hour to prayer with no Bible study. And I'm asking something very special.

I know that there are compelling reasons that many of you do not practice coming on Wednesday nights. There are other things that take your commitment away, which are good. But I'm asking for a special commitment one time in 1982 that you'll come Wednesday night.

If you never come on Wednesday nights any other time, come this Wednesday night, just one Wednesday night out of the year. And let's fill that chapel and say, God, as a church body, we want you to move upon us and break down whatever barriers are keeping us from winning people to Christ. Those are the three things that I want us to do.

And I pray that you will do all three or whichever ones the Lord lays most heavily on your heart. And now I want to close by reading. Something that happened 130 years ago in New York.

I've been reading in this book by J. Edwin or the light to the nations about the evangelical awakenings of the last century, trying to see how God did it. What did God do in the past to awaken his church and to bring in the fruit? One hundred and thirty years ago, around 1850, the earlier awakenings had cooled and things were not good. Here's what it says.

Secular and religious conditions combined to bring about a crash. The third great panic in American history swept the structure of speculative wealth away. Thousands of merchants were forced to the wall as banks failed.

Railroads went into bankruptcy. Factories were shut down. Vast numbers were thrown into unemployment.

New York City alone having 30000 idle men in October 1857, the hearts of the people were thoroughly weaned from the speculation of uncertain gain while hunger and despair stared them in the face. On 1st, July 1857, a quiet, zealous businessman named Jeremiah Lanphier took up an appointment as city missionary in downtown 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 downtown to the better residential quarters. Sound familiar? 1857. He was a good city missionary and the people thought they had the man for the job.

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 entitled How Often Shall I Pray, which concluded like this. A day of prayer, a prayer meeting, is held every Wednesday from 12 to 1 o'clock in the consistory building in the rear of North Dutch Church, corner of Fulton Streets, entrance from the Fulton and Ann Streets.

This meeting is intended to give merchants, mechanics, clerks, strangers and businessmen 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 designed for those who may find it inconvenient to remain for more than five or ten minutes, as well as those who can spare the hour. Accordingly, at 12 noon, 23rd September 1857, the door was opened and 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 conflict of fear and faith. Ten minutes elapsed, still no one.

Fifteen minutes passed, Lanphier was yet alone. Twenty minutes, 25, 30, and then at 12.30 a step was heard on the stairs and the first person appeared. Then another and another and another and six people were present and the prayer meeting began.

On the following Wednesday, October 7th, there were 40 intercessors. Thus, in the first week of October 1857, it was decided to hold the meeting daily instead of weekly. Within six months, 10,000 businessmen were gathering for daily 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 colorful history was sweeping the city. It was of such an order as 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 in the crowd? Let's pray together. Lord, as we pause now to do business with you concerning this week, I want to lead the people in a prayer of commitment.

Let's take them one at a time and shall we ask together, Lord, if I've never fasted before, if I've never prayed a half an hour every day any week of my life, is this the year where you would like me to make this one week resolution? Second, Lord, I'm so busy on Wednesday and I'm so busy on Tuesday and Monday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday to come all the way over here for a few minutes of prayer would be hard. Lord, I pray that you'll move people to come and pray with me and with Glenn, that our hearts might be encouraged that this is the year. And third, I know I don't usually come on Wednesday night, Lord, but maybe just this once.

Do you want me just this once to come and for one hour from 715 to 815, join my brothers and sisters and lay hold on you to break loose in my heart and in the hearts of our people that we might see people one to faith. Oh, God, you have been our help in ages past. You are our hope for years to come.

Grant, I pray, as we sing this song of affirmation, we might resolve to follow the inclinations you've put within our hearts. In Jesus name, amen. Thank you for listening to this message by John Piper, pastor for preaching at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

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