

1: Sowing and Reaping

Starter

How much interest do you take in where your food comes from, and under what conditions it is grown?

Key verse

“That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. Such large crowds gathered round him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. Then he told them many things in parables, saying: “A farmer went out to sow his seed...”
(Matthew 13:1-3)

“For six years you are to sow your fields and harvest the crops, but during the seventh year let the land lie unploughed and unused. Then the poor among your people may get food from it, and the wild animals may eat what is left. Do the same with your vineyard and your olive grove.”

(Exodus 23:10,11)

“Follow my decrees and be careful to obey my laws, and you will live safely in the land. Then the land will yield its fruit, and you will eat your fill and live there in safety.”

(Leviticus 25:18,19)

“You care for the land and water it; you enrich it abundantly. The streams of God are filled with water to provide the people with corn, for so you have ordained it.”

(Psalm 65:9,10)

“The owner’s servants came to him and said, “Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?”

(Matthew 13:27)



In the Beginning

Agriculture has been a part of human history in the Bible from the early verses of Genesis, where we read about a garden being planted with trees (both ornamental and fruiting bearing varieties), and the provision of livestock animals (Genesis 2:8-20). We then find Cain working the land to produce crops, and his brother Abel doing the work of a shepherd (Genesis 4), and this was the basis of life before the years in Egypt. The land was dry, requiring both hard work and irrigation in order to transform it into fertile soil. The early inhabitants were like Bedouin tribes of today; nomadic, living in tents, having to walk their livestock some distance to watering holes in the summer. Sometimes disputes took place over this precious commodity (as between Abraham and Abimelech in Genesis 21:25-31).

However, the lack of a permanent home did not stop Abraham and his descendants from growing crops, and they were aware that in God’s eyes they were simply stewards of the land that they farmed, which ultimately belonged to God.

‘The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers.’ (Leviticus 25:23)

Throughout the early dealings between God and humanity there are rules laid down for daily living. If looked at with modern eyes, many seem to be for the benefit of both people and the land, such as allowing for a fallow year during which the hard-worked soil could recover the nutrients necessary for growth, and for the poor to take a little from the land. At harvest times, the edges of a field were left so that the poor could gather grain, and during times of conflict fruiting trees were not to be cut down; ‘do not destroy its trees by putting an axe to them, because you can eat their fruit. Do not cut them down. Are the trees people, that you should besiege them?’ (Deuteronomy 20:19)

Question

How important are simple foods such as grains in your everyday diet?

The cycle of the seasons



In 1908 an Irish archaeologist, R. A. Stewart Macalister, found a small inscribed limestone tablet in the Canaanite city of Gezer, 20 miles west of Jerusalem. It is believed to date from the 10th century BC (the time of Solomon) and could possibly be a schoolboy's memory exercise or even the words of a song. For us, the importance of this object is that it describes the agricultural cycle month by month, along with the tasks to be performed at various times of the year. It is possible to tie these in with the major festivals such as the Feast of Passover at the beginning of the barley harvest, followed by the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost, when the wheat harvest started, and concluding with the Feast of Tabernacles, or Ingathering, which took place when the harvest was complete.

The seasons as described on the Gezer tablet are:

- 1 – Two months of olive harvesting (Sept/Oct or Oct/Nov)
- 2 – Two months of sowing grain, after the first winter rains.
3. - Two months late planting (Jan – Mar) of such as millet or lentils.
- 4 – One month of hoeing, cutting the flax close to the ground, later to be used to make thread.
- 5 – One month of harvesting barley (Apr/May) and wheat (May/June)
- 6 – One month of festivals, seven weeks from the beginning of the grain harvest, an offering of 'first fruits' for Pentecost.
- 7 – Two months of tending vines, during the hot summer months.
- 8 – One month of harvesting summer fruits, such as grapes, figs and pomegranates.

'I shall give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain, that you may gather in your grain and your wine and your oil. Take heed lest the anger of Yahweh be kindled against you, and He shut up the heavens, so that there be no rain.....'

(Deuteronomy 11:13-17)

'So Elijah went from there and found Elisha son of Shaphat. He was ploughing with twelve yoke of oxen, and he himself was driving the twelfth pair. Elijah went up to him and threw his cloak around him. Elisha then left his oxen and ran after Elijah. "Let me kiss my father and mother goodbye," he said, "and then I will come with you."

(1 Kings 19:19,20)

'If you enter your neighbour's cornfield, you may pick the ears with your hands, but you must not put a sickle to their standing corn.'

(Deuteronomy 23:25)

Sowing and reaping

The People of God were not short of knowledge regarding agricultural techniques, as their neighbours in Egypt and the north around the Tigris and Euphrates valleys had already highly developed methods of cultivation and irrigation. The major crops were those which we find throughout the Bible, such as grains, grapes and olives. It is possible that grain was cultivated by people living at the foot of Mount Carmel as long ago as the 8th millennium BC, and grain silos have been found in Beersheba dating back to the 4th millennium BC.

Sowing was achieved either by broadcasting the seed by hand whilst walking along previously ploughed furrows, or by using a rudimentary seed drill which would direct the seed into a furrow just behind the plough, so that they would be covered by falling soil. Oxen were yoked together to pull the wooden plough.

Once the grain was ripe, gathering it in was an urgent task, and hired workers would be needed on all but the smallest areas. Harvesting was achieved by cutting the standing grain with scythes, tying the stalks into sheaves, and taking these to flat rocky area for threshing to remove the grains. Any grains dropped or missed, along with the corners of the fields were left for the poor. The farmer was left with grain, coarse straw stubble for kindling or brick making, and a quantity of finer straw for fodder. Nothing was wasted.

'Most of us spend the first six days of each week sowing wild oats; then we go to church on Sunday and pray for a crop failure.'

(Fred Allen)

'Don't judge each day by the harvest you reap but by the seeds that you plant.'

(Robert Louis Stevenson)

'With every deed you are sowing a seed, though the harvest you may not see.'

(Ella Wheeler Wilcox)

'Happiness held is the seed; Happiness shared is the flower.'

(John Harrigan)

Questions

The cycle of the seasons as found on the Gezer tablet might remind us of some words from Ecclesiastes 3:1; 'There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens.'

How true, or not, have you found these words in your life?

In the UK there are Food Banks which collect food items to give to those who are struggling financially, other countries may have similar charitable schemes. Is there any Biblical connection here with the practice of not harvesting the edges of a field to allow for gleaning of grain?



The sower

Read Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23, and if time verses 24-30

Picture Jesus using a boat close to the shoreline as his pulpit, looking up at the hillside fields for a human picture to illustrate a spiritual message about faith, and there before him is someone walking across the field, sowing seed (in Greek it is 'the' sower). Bishop Tom Wright points out in his commentary that the acoustics by Lake Galilee are so good that Jesus hardly had to raise his voice to be heard by a crowd. Jesus had their full attention.

The story is, of course, not really about the seed, which is constant, but the variability of the soil into which it is sown. Fields were cultivated in strips with a path (and public right of way) between, which is the well-trodden and compacted soil that Jesus calls the path or 'wayside'.

A lot of ground in Palestine is limestone rock covered with a very thin skin of earth, into which roots cannot penetrate very far. More familiar to most of us would be the soil that looks clean in spring, but quickly becomes invaded by creeping perennial grasses, weeds, nettles or thorny brambles.

A rich and fertile soil is a blessing to any gardener or farmer. The listeners (and subsequent readers) are, of course, the soil into which the word of God is sown.

The people to whom Jesus was talking were waiting for prophesy to be fulfilled and God to sow the fields with a crop that would bring in his final and glorious harvest. God's kingdom would then be established.

Seedtime to harvest is a wonderful picture of the spreading of the Good News of the Gospel.

'And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, "Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favour."

'Naomi said to her, "Go ahead, my daughter." So she went out, entered a field and began to glean behind the harvesters.'

(Ruth 2:2-3a)

'If you follow my decrees and are careful to obey my commands, I will send you rain in its season, and the ground will yield its crops and the trees their fruit. Your threshing will continue until grape harvest and the grape harvest will continue until planting, and you will eat all the food you want and live in safety in your land.'

(Leviticus 26:3-5)

'Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few."

(Matthew 9:27)

Question

Do you have a connection to the earth through growing food, and if so, how important is that in your life and faith?

Discussion

'Even after a bad harvest there must be sowing.'
(Lucius Annaeus Seneca)

'It is only the farmer who faithfully plants seeds in the Spring, who reaps a harvest in the Autumn.'
(B. C. Forbes)

'Before the reward there must be labor. You plant before you harvest. You sow in tears before you reap joy.'
(Ralph Ransom)

'The longer I live, the more I am enabled to realize that I have but one life to live on Earth, and that this one life is but a brief life, for sowing, in comparison with eternity, for reaping.'
(George Muller)

'The law of harvest is to reap more than you sow. Sow an act, and you reap a habit. Sow a habit and you reap a character. Sow a character and you reap a destiny.'
(James Allen)

'The glacier was God's great plough set at work ages ago to grind, furrow, and knead over, as it were, the surface of the earth.'
(Louis Agassiz)

'All cannot rule, nor can all be ruled. All cannot plow, nor can all sow, nor reap. No more can all neglect such employments, else the race would become extinct. Each has his business to perform, his part to act. It is a duty he owes to the rest as well as to himself.'
(Joseph P. Bradley)

1: How important is soil preparation prior to sowing, and what are the potential problems with poor preparation?

2: In what ways can we best prepare ourselves to respond to God's Word?

3: What are the barriers that the Church faces today in getting the Gospel message across, and how do these barriers reflect the farmer's problems in Jesus' parable?

4: The theme of harvest is a large one in Scripture. If a harvest is assured, what responsibility do we have for the 'soil' that is struggling to produce anything from the seed scattered upon it?

5: Jesus' parable goes on to talk of weeds growing alongside the wheat. It's not always easy to spot the weeds in our gardens - are there good reasons for not being too severe with our weeding, both in garden and Church?

6: The parable is ultimately about judgement (the harvest) so what does it teach us, and how comfortable is that message?

Takeaway

If you have a garden, however small, or have potted plants in your home, look at them and think how you might be able to obtain a better crop or display.

Prayer

Pray for all those lives in your family, neighbourhood or town which are unprepared for the seed to germinate and grow without help.