



Hazelbank Presbyterian Church



Rev Alan Johnston

Today is the day we celebrate the harvest in our church's calendar and we celebrate this day because we have a gracious and merciful God who has once again supplied us with the food our bodies need. We celebrate this day because we know that it is good to give thanks because while we enjoy plenty there are hundreds upon thousands across this planet who today are starving. Today we are looking at an aspect of harvest through the book of Jeremiah. Last week we looked at chapter 3 and this harvest Sunday we are looking at a short passage taken from chapter 4.

Let's look at these verses again before we start.

Verses 3-4 : ³This is what the LORD says to the men of Judah and to Jerusalem: "Break up your unploughed ground and do not sow among thorns. Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, circumcise your hearts, you men of Judah and people of Jerusalem, or my wrath will break out and burn like fire because of the evil you have done— burn with no one to quench it.

Two points to understand come from this reading:

- 1) There can be no spiritual harvest from hearts that remain unploughed.
- 2) External evidence is no evidence at all.

- 1) There can be no spiritual harvest from hearts that remain unploughed.

Before we could enjoy the harvest there had to be an initial ploughing. So, what exactly is ploughing? The plough is a tool used in farming for initial cultivation of soil in preparation for sowing seed or planting. The plough can be regarded as a development of the pick, or of the spade. Ploughs were initially pulled by humans, later by oxen, and later still in some countries, by horses. Modern ploughs are, in industrialized countries, powered by tractors. Ploughing has several beneficial effects. The major reason for ploughing is to turn over the upper layer of the soil. This may also incorporate the residue from the previous crop into the soil. Ploughing reduces the prevalence of weeds in the fields, and makes the soil more porous, easing later planting. Excessively deep ploughing or digging brings up subsoil and mixes subsoil with topsoil.

This can damage the soil.

Here in Jeremiah chapter 4 God tells his people to

"Break up your unploughed ground and do not sow among thorns.

Please don't be mistaken about what God is saying here. God is not giving them a lesson in agriculture! God is not telling them how to plant their crops so as to enjoy a more bountiful harvest. What God is referring to here is their hearts! These people because of their rebellion had become hard hearted. They had turned away from God and no longer wanted to hear from him.

But the amazing point that they were missing was that God wanted even yet to bless them. But there could be no blessing, no spiritual harvest because the land or the ground God wanted to harvest from was not even fit for spiritual seeds of Blessing to sown there. Not only was the ground too hard but there were things in their hearts that would act like thorns and kill the potential harvest.

Turn with me to Mark's gospel for just a moment to Mark chapter 4:

³“Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. ⁶But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ⁷Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. ⁸Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, multiplying thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times.” ⁹Then Jesus said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” In Explaining the parable Jesus told his disciples: ¹⁶Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. ¹⁷But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. ¹⁸Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; ¹⁹but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. ²⁰Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown.”

In many ways the parable of the sower that Jesus spoke of, while on one hand would have been a very strong visual aid because it was mirrored in everyday life, it was also a throw back to this reference in Jeremiah that everyone who was a Jew would have recognized. God was telling them that they would not harvest any blessings from him until he was able to sow the seed in their hearts. The seed could not be sown where the ground was hard and rocky and where there were thorns growing.

What do we want as we sit here this morning? Do we want blessings from God? Do we want to allow God to sow those seeds in our lives? Do we want to experience a spiritual harvest on this our harvest Sunday? Perhaps you have been feeling far from God recently. Perhaps you have known a hardening to his word and the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps you have heard of others who have been blessed by God and rather than feeling happy for them you have been feeling emotions such as jealousy and envy. While we celebrate God's goodness to us on this harvest Sunday, we are encouraged by that same God who has blessed us abundantly with food enough to spare, to come near to him again so that He can bless us with a spiritual harvest that does not have a best before or use by date on it. One that stretches into eternity. Is this really something we believe we can do without? I don't think so. So I am assuming that we all want God's blessing and a spiritual harvest in our lives, so how do we go about it? How does this ploughing take place?

It takes place in at least two ways:

- We need to allow God's word, the bible to become personal to us. What do I mean? I know that it sounds like a strange thing to say but we need to read our bibles understanding that yes God's word while spoken to different people at different times and in different place is prophetic in as much as it is living and active and so very relevant for

us even today. So we need to allow it to speak into our lives – not the person sitting beside us or that other person we know of in this building that could really do with listening to this...Let God's word become personal for you. As you do this the Holy spirit moves in close to our hearts and the process of ploughing begins and the hardened soil is turned over. God's word is so very powerful in transforming the lives of those who allow it to speak into their lives. During Jeremiah's time God spoke through the prophets and many who heard Jeremiah speak did in fact plough their hearts for God's glory. Many didn't. But we today have the opportunity to allow that same God to speak to us from his living word as recorded by Jeremiah.

-The second way we can act is by allowing the spiritual seed that God will then sow, to be sown in a soul that is free from thorns.

The obvious ploughing of a farmer's field will do away with most of the thorns and the implications for us in this reading are that as we allow Gods' word to plough through our hearts it will do away with most of the thorns. The problem comes when we come away from the word of God we then get involved in the things around us that become thorns to our spiritual development. I want to make suggestion that may be an option for some of you though granted not everyone. If you can before you head home take time to go for a walk or go somewhere quite to sit and think about what God has been saying to you. Instead of heading home and turning on the distractions of the world and replanting the thorns in your life take time to allow the Holy Spirit to water the seeds he is planting in your hearts even now as I speak his word to you.

James Hamilton writes:

Before refrigerators, people used ice houses to preserve their food. Ice houses had thick walls, no windows, and a tightly fitted door. In winter, when streams and lakes were frozen, large blocks of ice were cut, hauled to the ice houses, and covered with sawdust. Often the ice would last well into the summer. One man lost a valuable watch while working in an ice house. He searched diligently for it, carefully raking through the sawdust, but didn't find it. His fellow workers also looked, but their efforts, too, proved futile. A small boy who heard about the fruitless search slipped into the ice house during the noon hour and soon emerged with the watch. Amazed, the men asked him how he found it.

"I closed the door," the boy replied, "lay down in the sawdust, and kept very still. Soon I heard the watch ticking."

Often the question is not whether God is speaking, but whether we are being still enough, and quiet enough, to hear.

Our second point then is this :

2) External evidence is no evidence at all.

Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, circumcise your hearts.

One Sunday morning an old farmer entered a church just before services were to begin. Although the old man and his clothes were spotlessly clean, he wore jeans, a denim shirt and boots that were very worn and ragged. In his hand he carried a worn out old hat and an equally worn out bible. The church he entered was in a very exclusive part of the city. It was the largest and most beautiful church the old farmer had ever seen. The people of the congregation were all dressed with expensive clothes and accessories. As the farmer took a seat, the others settled down in areas away from him. No one greeted, spoke to, or welcomed him. They were all dismayed at his appearance and did not attempt to hide it.

The preacher gave a long sermon about Hellfire and brimstone and a stern lecture on how people ought to be finding more people to win to Jesus because it had been a long time since there had been any new members. As the old farmer was leaving the church, the preacher approached him and asked the farmer to do him a favour. "Before you return next time, maybe have a talk with God and ask him what He thinks would be appropriate attire for worship. You might find that would help you fit in a little better and feel more at home with us." The old farmer assured the preacher he would. The next Sunday, he showed up for the services wearing the same ragged jeans, shirt, boots, and hat. Once again he was completely shunned and ignored. The preacher approached the man and said, "I thought I asked you to speak to God about your attire and get his input on the matter of appropriate dress for worship in His church." "Oh, I did that... I truly did," replied the old farmer. "If you spoke to God, what did he tell you the proper dress should be for worshipping in here?" asked the preacher. "Well, sir, God told me that He didn't have a clue what I should wear here these days – He says He's not attended here in a long time."

Jewish boys were circumcised when they were eight days old, given a name and made a son of the covenant. Although no amount of surgery on the body could change the heart, the Jews thought that this ritual was their guarantee of salvation. God however wanted them to operate on their heart by putting away their unfaithfulness and disobedience. Paul writes in Romans chapter 2:

Romans 2 : ²⁵Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised.

²⁶If those who are not circumcised keep the law's requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised?

²⁷The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker.

²⁸A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical.

²⁹No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God.

I find myself agreeing with Warren Wiersbe when he writes: "Many people today depend on baptism, the Lord's Supper, confirmation or some other religious ritual for their salvation when what God wants from us is sincere faith from a repentant heart. Salvation is a gift we receive by faith; it is not a reward we earn by being religious."

Today as we celebrate our harvest I wonder if you could ask yourself a question, "What is God harvesting from my life?" Is he harvesting the same unfaithfulness and disobedience that he did from his chosen people or is he harvesting a life that is evidence of a ploughed, thorn free circumcised heart?