

Thesis: We can experience the happiness of the harvest!

Let me do a little poll today: How many of you would say that Winter is your favorite season? Spring? Summer? Fall?

I like living in Southwest Missouri where we have four seasons. I think my favorite season has changed. Earlier in my life I think I would have said "Fall," because then the hard work on the farm gave way to a slower pace. Now, though, I think my favorite season is Spring, and I look forward to the April showers and the May flowers.

Are there seasons in the life of a church? Does the church experience a Spring, a Summer, a Fall, and then a Winter? Is Winter the end for the church, or just a dormant time before a new beginning? I confess that I have and still do resist the idea of seasons in the life of a church. I want every season to be harvest season! The needs of our world and the urgency of our mission causes me to resist any Winter time.

If there are seasons in the life of the church, what season are we in? What season do we need to be in? Even though I want every season to be harvest season, and by God's grace we can see a harvest any time, I would like to suggest we are now in Spring, in what I want to call the Seed-Planting Season. Whether you realize it or not, we have been preparing our hearts for this time. We have all been challenged with the urgent call to "raze hell," to destroy the works of the devil (1 John 3:8). I have sought to paint a picture of Rock-Solid Christ-followers who hear and do God's word, using the 7/24 Challenge (seven days a week I will spend at least 24 minutes every day interacting with God through His word). We have stressed the urgency of prayer, knowing that razing hell requires heaven's help! On both of our campuses I am seeing a growing culture of service that God is using to prepare the soil in our community for this time of seed-planting. I think we are ready for this Season!

Before we go any further, let me clarify my language: the seed I am talking about is the Word of God (read the parable of Jesus in Matthew 13), and even more precisely the seed is the gospel of the Kingdom of God and of Jesus Christ who died for our sins and rose from the dead! Many other things are good (loving and serving others, praying, living a life that gives

credibility, practicing spiritual disciplines, etc.) but these are not the seed. And if we are to see a glorious ingathering of the harvest for Christ's sake and His glory, we must plant seed! If we do not plant any seed, there will be little if any harvest. If we plant more seed, we can anticipate a greater harvest! So let me ask this question of all of us who claim Christ: How are we doing when it comes to seed-planting? I am haunted by the words of a writer who said, "Churches in America are praying for a harvest, having never planted the seed!" I am energized by the hope of a great harvest ahead if we will broadcast seed, day after day and week after week.

Let's look today at a brief Psalm, Psalm 126, The historical context is the beginning of the return of God's people to their homeland after some 70 years of captivity to the Babylonians. In this Psalm we find hurt, but we also find hope and even hilarity!

*When the LORD brought back the captivity of Zion,  
We were like those who dream.*

*2 Then our mouth was filled with laughter,  
And our tongue with singing.*

*Then they said among the nations,  
"The LORD has done great things for them."*

*3 The LORD has done great things for us,  
And we are glad.*

*4 Bring back our captivity, O LORD,  
As the streams in the South.*

*5 Those who sow in tears  
Shall reap in joy.*

*6 He who continually goes forth weeping,  
Bearing seed for sowing,  
Shall doubtless come again with rejoicing,  
Bringing his sheaves with him. (Psalm 126:1-6 NKJV)*

Verses 1-3 of this Psalm give us a snapshot of happy people being delivered from captivity; a captivity that had caused many of them to hang their harps on the willow trees and lose their songs, Verse 4 was an appeal to God to complete the work He had begun, because many of them were in adverse circumstances when they returned to a desolate homeland, and many of their people were still in Babylon. The Psalmist longed for the days when the

roads would be filled with returning pilgrims like the return of the floods to the dry creek beds of the south land. Their joy was tinged with pain as they cried out to God.

However, I would like to focus our attention to verses 5 and 6, where the Psalmist uses an agricultural analogy that would have been exceedingly clear to the culture to which it was addressed. It is an analogy that is used in the book of Job, in the Psalms, in Proverbs, in Hosea, in Micah, in Matthew and Luke, in 1 and 2 Corinthians, and (perhaps most memorably) in Galatians 6:7-9. Look back with me at those two verses in our text, and note with me the prescription for a happy harvest.

We first notice these words in verse 5: *Those who sow in tears*. The sowing is not a surprise; only an American Christian would expect a happy harvest without seed-sowing! No, the surprise is in the *tears*. This is intensified in verse 6: *He who continually goes forth weeping* (emphasis added). So, what's with the *weeping*? One writer suggests it is the weeping of humility, humility that comes from the truth that God would condescend to use us in His great mission. I do not find that interpretation satisfying. Rather, I would suggest the *weeping* is because of two things: the seriousness of the task and the preciousness of the seed. Think about it with me: When the farmer goes out to sow, he holds in his hands his future and the future of his family. Would his family make it through the next season and those that followed? The answer was found in the seed and in the sowing! It was literally a matter of life and death.

Is our seed-planting any less serious? No! It is infinitely more serious. We deal not with the next few seasons or even a lifetime; we deal with eternity! Every person in this room will spend eternity somewhere! Either we will be in the blessed presence of God, with our Savior Jesus Christ, or we will be separated from God forever in a place of unspeakable torment, without God and without hope forever and ever and ever! Seed-planting is serious business, because without it there will be no life, no harvest. The lives of your family, the lives of your friends, perhaps your own life depends on someone planting the seed of the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ and His perfect and finished work on the cross, the good news of His second coming and the life we can have in Him, the good news of salvation freely offered to lost sinners! Is anyone planting the seed? Is there any *weeping* for lost men and women, lost boys and girls? This is serious, my dear friends! That is why there is *weeping*!

I mentioned a second reason for *weeping*: the preciousness of the seed. This seed that represents hope has been carefully preserved for this time of planting. Beth Moore, in a study many of you are currently involved in, suggests that too often Christians are guilty of eating the seed, not planting it! In the world to which this Psalm was addressed that would be suicide! Even if you were hungry, even if your wife and children were hungry, you must not eat the seed! The seed is precious! The seed must be planted! The seed sack could be labeled “Hope,” for that is exactly what it represented.

What about the seed we carry into our world? Is it precious? Again, the seed of the Word of God is costly and precious beyond measure. It is precious because of the price paid for our salvation. The writer of Hebrews makes a powerful contrast with these words:

*13 For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, 14 how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? (Heb 9:13-14 NKJV)*

Peter spoke of this in his first letter:

*17 And if you call on the Father, who without partiality judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves throughout the time of your stay here in fear; 18 knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, 19 but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot. (1 Peter 1:17-20 NKJV).*

The true story we tell is precious because He is precious and the blood He shed is precious! In the words of Andre Crouch, the blood of Jesus will never lose its power! It is infinitely precious, and because of that we go forth with continual weeping, knowing that without the shedding of His blood there would be no seed to sow!

Let me be sure you are with me: **If there is to be a happy harvest, there must be serious sowing!** If we neglect that sowing, or if we treat it with a casual attitude, lives will be lost! Someone you love stands now at the brink of destruction, and only the seed of the gospel can bring life! Paul said it so clearly: *Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God* (Romans

10:17). I ask again: My dear friends are we planting the seed? Lives will be won or lost because of seed sown or seed squandered!

We must not leave this text until we have pondered the precious promise in these verses. Listen again to verse 5: *Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy.* And once again hear verse 6: *He who continually goes forth weeping, bearing seed for sowing, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him.* What a glorious promise to seed-planters! God is responsible to bring His word to bear on the hearts of the hearers through the convicting work of the Holy Spirit; God is responsible to draw people to Himself; God is responsible to open eyes and hearts; God is responsible to bring repentance and faith, to give the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ. It is and must be God who gives the increase (1 Corinthians 3:6)! So what is our responsibility? Sow the seed! Sow it with gentleness; sow it with humility; sow it with fear and trembling; sow it with tears – but sow it! **We can experience the happiness of the harvest if we will sow the seed!**

Today, I want to extend to you an invitation: If you have not trusted Jesus Christ and His work for your salvation, I invite you to come today as He grants you repentance and faith. Receive the Word, and live! But there is another part to the invitation today: If you are a believer, and if you are willing to join me in this season of seed-planting, I want to give you some seed. As you leave the worship center, near each of the fountains you will find an oval-shaped galvanized pail, offered to us by my friend Larry McCroskey at the Nixa Hardware. In those buckets you will find gospel seed, messages of hope. Is this the only way to sow seeds? Absolutely not! Simple conversations, Facebook, email, snail mail, carrier pigeons – just do it! It is my earnest desire that at least 2000 seeds will be planted this week, planted prayerfully, seriously, even tearfully. Please ask for the Holy Spirit to lead! Do not leave the seed in place of a tip! Be ready and sow the seed!

Let me leave you with these words from Robert Louis Stevenson:  
*"Don't judge each day by the harvest you reap, but by the seed you plant."*

(I may or may not use the story that follows, as time allows and the Spirit leads.)

Back in 1921, a missionary couple named David and Svea Flood went with their two-year-old son from Sweden to the heart of Africa-to what was then called the Belgian Congo. They met up with another young Scandinavian couple, the Ericksons, and the four of them sought God for direction. In those days of much tenderness and devotion and sacrifice, they felt led of the Lord to set out from the main mission station and take the gospel to a remote area. This was a huge step of faith. At the village of N'dolera they were rebuffed by the chief, who would not let them enter his town for fear of alienating the local gods. The two couples opted to go half a mile up the slope and build their own mud huts.

They prayed for a spiritual breakthrough, but there was none. The only contact with the villagers was a young boy, who was allowed to sell them chickens and eggs twice a week. Svea Flood--a tiny woman only four feet, eight inches tall--decided that if this was the only African she could talk to, she would try to lead the boy to Jesus. And in fact, she succeeded. But there were no other encouragements.

Meanwhile, malaria continued to strike one member of the little band after another. In time the Ericksons decided they had had enough suffering and left to return to the central mission station. David and Svea Flood remained near N'dolera to go on alone. Then, of all things, Svea found herself pregnant in the middle of the primitive wilderness. When the time came for her to give birth, the village chief softened enough to allow a midwife to help her. A little girl was born, whom they named Aina. The delivery, however, was exhausting, and Svea Flood was already weak from bouts of malaria. The birth process was a heavy blow to her stamina. She lasted only another seventeen days.

Inside David Flood, something snapped in that moment. He dug a crude grave, buried his twenty-seven-year-old wife, and then took his children back down the mountain to the mission station. Giving his newborn daughter to the Ericksons, he snarled, "I'm going back to Sweden. I've lost my wife, and I obviously can't take care of this baby. God has ruined my life." With that, he headed for the port, rejecting not only his calling, but God Himself.

Within eight months both the Ericksons were stricken with a mysterious malady and died within days of each other. The baby was then turned over to some American missionaries, who adjusted her Swedish name to "Aggie" and eventually brought her back to the United States at age three. This family loved the little girl and were afraid that if they tried to return to Africa, some legal obstacle might separate her from them. So they decided

to stay in their home country and switch from missionary work to pastoral ministry. And that is how Aggie grew up in South Dakota. As a young woman, she attended North Central Bible College in Minneapolis. There she met and married a young man named Dewey Hurst.

Years passed. The Hursts enjoyed a fruitful ministry. Aggie gave birth first to a daughter, then a son. In time her husband became president of a Christian college in the Seattle area, and Aggie was intrigued to find so much Scandinavian heritage there. One day a Swedish religious magazine appeared in her mailbox. She had no idea who had sent it, and of course she couldn't read the words. But as she turned the pages, all of a sudden a photo stopped her cold. There in a primitive setting was a grave with a white cross--and on the cross were the words SVEA FLOOD.

Aggie jumped in her car and went straight for a college faculty member who, she knew, could translate the article. "What does this say!" she demanded. The instructor summarized the story: It was about missionaries who had come to N'dolera long ago...the birth of a white baby...the death of the young mother...the one little African boy who had been led to Christ...and how, after the whites had all left, the boy had grown up and finally persuaded the chief to let him build a school in the village. The article said that gradually he won all his students to Christ...the children led their parents to Christ...even the chief had become a Christian. Today there were six hundred Christian believers in that one village....All because of the sacrifice of David and Svea Flood.

For the Hursts' twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, the college presented them with the gift of a vacation to Sweden. There Aggie sought to find her real Father. An old man now, David Flood had remarried, fathered four more children, and generally dissipated his life with alcohol. He had recently suffered a stroke. Still bitter, he had one rule in his family: "Never mention the name of God--because God took everything from me."

After an emotional reunion with her half-brothers and half-sister, Aggie brought up the subject of seeing her father. The others hesitated, "You can talk to him," they replied, "even though he's very ill now. But you need to know that whenever he hears the name of God, he flies into a rage." Aggie was not to be deterred. She walked into the squalid apartment, with liquor bottles everywhere, and approached the seventy-three-year-old man lying in a rumpled bed.

"Papa..." she said tentatively. He turned and began to cry. "Aina," he said. "I never meant to give you away." "It's all right, Papa," she replied, taking him gently in her arms. "God took care of me." The man instantly stiffened.

The tears stopped. "God forgot all of us. Our lives have been like this because of him." He turned his face back to the wall.

Aggie stroked his face and then continued, undaunted. "Papa, I've got a little story to tell you, and it's a true one. You didn't go to Africa in vain. Mama didn't die in vain. The little boy you won to the Lord grew up to win that whole village to Jesus Christ. The one seed you planted just kept growing and growing. Today there are six hundred African people serving the Lord because you were faithful to the call of God in your life.....Papa, Jesus loves you. He has never hated you."

The old man turned back to look into his daughter's eyes. His body relaxed. He began to talk. And by the end of the afternoon, he had come back to the God he had resented for so many decades. Over the next few days, father and daughter enjoyed warm moments together. Aggie and her husband soon had to return to America-and within a few weeks, David Flood had gone into eternity.

A few years later, the Hursts were attending a high-level evangelism conference in London, England, when a report was given from the nation of Zaire(the former Belgian Congo). The superintendent of the national church, representing some 110,000 baptized believers, spoke eloquently of the gospel's spread in his nation. Aggie could not help going to ask him afterward if he had ever heard of David and Svea Flood. "Yes, Madam," the man replied in French, his words then being translated into English. "It was Svea Flood who led me to Jesus Christ. I was the boy who brought food to your parents before you were born. In fact, to this day your mother's grave and her memory are honored by all of us." He embraced her in a long, sobbing hug. Then he continued, "You must come to Africa to see, because your mother is the most famous person in our history."

In time that is exactly what Aggie Hurst and her husband did. They were welcomed by cheering throngs of villagers. She even met the man who had been hired by her father many years before to carry her back down the mountain in a hammock-cradle. The most dramatic moment, of course, was when the pastor escorted Aggie to see her mother's white cross for herself. She knelt in the soil to pray and give thanks. Later that day, in the church, the pastor read from John 12:24:"I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds." He then followed with Psalms 126:5: "Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy."

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