

FGBC: Meaning in the Miracles: Plastic Eggs or the Harvest?

Matthew 9:35-10:1

March 11, 2018

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Please grab your Bibles and open them up to the end of Matthew chapter 9.

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Today we are concluding The Meaning of the Miracles series. And as we start digging into the text there is a prayer running around in my mind, and my goal is to get it running around in yours as well. And that prayer is: Father, may 2018 be the year that we get to see Your Spirit fall on PG and transform the city, and may You use us to accomplish this. That's the prayer.

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Now if I'm honest with myself, I'm not as troubled by this prayer as I should be. When I wake up in the night and can't get back to sleep, the thoughts that keep me awake are rarely: "Jesus' Spirit is falling on PG, and I wonder if I'm going to get to see it happen?"

I'm just confessing here, but usually when I can't sleep it is dumb stuff like "is there going to be another flood in my house", or "do I need to shovel my roof" or "which of my kids is going to try to kill the other tomorrow?" – stuff that isn't going to matter in 6 months. Now perhaps you are way more spiritual than me, and you never get concerned about things that aren't going to matter long term. But it turns out there are things worth losing sleep over.

And in today's text we are going to see what kinds of things kept Jesus up at night. And the major concern He had was who was going to get to be part of the kingdom of God breaking into the world, and how the harvest was going to be brought in. Jesus was concerned about something He called harvest, and it kept Him up at night.

So in Luke 6, just before He preaches to a great crowd from all of Judea who had come to hear Him and be healed we read:

One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, He called His disciples to Him and chose twelve of them, whom He also designated apostles (Luke 6:12-13)

So the thing that kept Jesus up that night was concern for who would help Him bring in the crowds of people God was calling to Himself. And He chose 12 men, from among those who were following Him to be His apostles, which means sent ones.

Or in Matthew 14, just after feeding 5000 people who had brought their brokenness to Jesus, we read:

After He had dismissed them, He went up on a mountainside by Himself to pray. Later that night, He was there alone (Matthew 14:23)

The crowds of lost people, ripe for entry into God's kingdom, kept Jesus up at night. He was concerned for them. And He brought this concern to His Father in prayer. And we are going to see this played out in today's text which comes right at the end of the big section of miracles we have been discussing for the last several weeks.

So just before Matthew 8 and 9 we get Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. In this Sermon Jesus lays out what it looks like to be His disciple. And a disciple is someone who follows a master and seeks to be like them. And Jesus also says some incredible things about Himself in this section. So for example, near the end of the Sermon He says on Judgment Day many people are going to claim they know Him, but it's not whether you know Jesus that matters, but whether Jesus knows you. And Jesus says only those who have heard His words and put them into practice are going to be saved.¹

So Jesus talked as though His vote alone will determine the eternal destiny of everyone on earth. Now that is a huge claim. The world hears those kinds of words and things "What a bigot! Who does He think He is?" And the answer to that question is "Jesus thinks He is God."

Now when people think they are God, general consensus says it is wise to write them off as crazy. So when high school teacher Jim Jones founded the People's Temple and claimed not only to be Jesus but Buddha, Gandhi and Lenin, most of the world was sure he was crazy - everyone except for about 900 who followed him. And when he had these 900 drink Kool aid laced with cyanide, the world's suspicions were confirmed.

Or there is currently a Japanese man named Matayoshi who prefers to be called Only God Mitsuo Matayoshi Jesus – quite a name! And he claims he is on a mission to save the world – nobody has told him this has already been done I guess. Interestingly he is also attempting to become the Japanese Prime minister and the UN Secretary General. These are big hopes. And what gets his political opponents attention is how he regularly tells them to commit suicide by disemboweling themselves and has on several occasions promised to send them to the flames of hell.² Crazy!

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And actually there is no shortage of men who have claimed to be God. But the two things that lack in all their stories are verifiable miracles, and ultimately evidence of immortality. These "gods" just keep dying.

But after Jesus made these claims He turned around and started healing crowds of people including lepers, the blind, and paralytics among countless others. Then He calmed storms and fed thousands. And on top of this He brought several people back from the dead before rising from the dead Himself. Nobody else ever, has claimed to be God, and done these kinds of things.

¹ Matthew 7:21-27

² Both anecdotes taken from: <http://www.monitor.co.ug/artsculture/Reviews/PEOPLE-WHO-CLAIMED-TO-BE-GOD/691232-2227784-8jpxpw/index.html> (Accessed March 9, 2018)

So, because Jesus did things only God could do, the argument is, the things He said are worth listening to. And in today's text, after just performing all these miracles, Jesus turns around and tells His disciples what He expects them to do after what they've seen.

And maybe this is a little surprising for you. But after speaking the words of God and doing the actions of God Jesus asks them to pray. And specifically He wants them and us to pray for what kept Him up at night. And that's where I get this prayer: Father, may 2018 be the year that we get to see Your Spirit fall on PG and transform the city, and may You use us to accomplish this.

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Look with me at Matthew chapter 9 starting in verse 35, and we are going to read right down to chapter 10 verse 1. And it's important to know that the chapter breaks that we have in our Bibles are not original to the text. These were put in afterward. And so the break in the text is a bit contrived. So Matthew 9, verse 35:

[Read Matthew 9:35-10:1]

So verse 35 sets the context for this paragraph, and it is a summing up verse. In fact, it is almost an exact repetition of the final paragraph before Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount. So at the end of chapter 4 we read:

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. (Matthew 4:23)

So these two verses are like book ends, and they tell us we are at the end of this section now. This is the context. And so in this paragraph Jesus looks out at the crowds who have been listening to Him speak God's words and watching Him do God's actions. And then Jesus directs His attention to His disciples and gives two pictures to describe what He sees.

So in verse 36 first we see "When He saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."

Now the focus has shifted as we get into this last paragraph. The previous two chapters are full of chamois of random people who end up getting touched by Jesus. And we know the disciples were there watching all these things happen, but they haven't shown up in the story. The story has been about Jesus and the leper or Jesus and Jairus.

And so throughout these paragraphs we've been associating ourselves with the broken people who need Jesus' help. And it's good for us to do that. But now the characters in the story have shifted. It is Jesus and the 12 disciples here. And so as we get into this paragraph, instead of focusing on us being the ones in need, the text invites us to associate ourselves with the disciples who are following Jesus, and on His team.

Now that describes some of us. If you have dedicated your life to living for Jesus' glory, and you are seeking to look like your Master then this is you – you're a disciple. But others of us aren't sure yet. Maybe you've heard some stuff about Jesus and it sounds interesting, but at this point you aren't all in. That's okay, but today if this is you, you are going to be listening in on a conversation between Jesus and His disciples.

And the first thing we get as Jesus turns and addresses His disciples is "Look at the crowds, they are like sheep without a shepherd."

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Now I'm going to go out on a limb here and say not many of us spend our days herding sheep, so the nuances here are a bit lost on us. So let me try to flesh this out with another picture.

Have you seen one of these? [hold up plastic egg] Where do you get one of these?

You get one of these eggs from one of those vending machines at the mall. Now before you ask "why would anyone spend money on that kind of trash?" I'll tell you. Parents of kids who are melting down will pay for this kind of stuff. Now judge me all you want, but these machines are magnets.

So they – whoever they are – have put these machines in the hall on the way to the bathroom because they know every 2 to 6-year-old kid who goes to the mall has to go to the bathroom. And they have figured that every kid has been pre-programmed to start commenting on how they are going to bleed out unless they get what these machines contain. Don't look at me like it's only my kids this happens to!

And if you've looked closely then you've probably seen the war going on inside the brain of the parent. "I could have two minutes of sanity if I just hand over my life savings ... and it might be worth it."

The draw those machines have on children is crazy. Somehow even though everyone knows all you are going to get is a little plastic egg with a pink ring or a two-centimetre tall stuffy, every kid wants one.

Now it isn't a cardinal sin to give into this occasionally. But from my experience, if given the chance, my kids would spend all their money and most of mine emptying these machines out. And all they would have to show for it would be a pile of junk and some rotten teeth. So I need to step in and direct the minds of these little sinful consumers to something that is going to be better for them long term. Sheep need a shepherd – maybe not a helicopter shepherd, but a shepherd none the less.

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Okay great. But what if you aren't 6 anymore and those machines have lost their draw. Well, it turns out Canadian adults exhibit this same behaviour when they think about God. So the National Post presented the results of a Canada wide survey a couple years ago which concluded that 71% of women and 64% of men in Canada believe there is a God.³ And yet the majority also said that religion is not important to them.

But there is an interesting phenomenon that occurs in people who believe in God but don't practice religion, and that is that they tend to pray when things are going badly. So when they lose their job, or someone in their immediate family gets sick, or they run into some financial trouble all of a sudden they start praying "Please God, help me. Help this situation get better." And often they throw in an ultimatum not so different from a kid throwing a tantrum: "If you help me then I'll attend church or give some money away." You fill in the blank.

But throughout this series we've talked about how actually God's blessings come to us through the difficult things we experience. It was when Jairus' daughter died that He got to meet Jesus. It was the desperate brokenness of the bleeding woman and the leper that made them fall at Jesus' feet. So praying for God to take the difficult situations out of our lives is actually asking God to give us what we don't need.

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The other day a lady at our church who has an adult daughter who isn't following Jesus told me about a conversation they had. Her daughter said to her "I sure hope Jesus doesn't bring anything bad into my life to wake me up."

And when people pray this way they are acting like sheep who don't have a shepherd. And Matthew says Jesus had compassion on these people.

The word compassion means torn up in the guts. So this week CBC released a story about 2 million children in The Congo who are at risk of starving to death. To put that in perspective, there are 5.6 million children 14 and under in Canada, so that would be like almost every second kid about to die. And the picture on the story shows a six-year-old boy looking helplessly at the camera with incredibly big and hopeful eyes. The author of this story knows that if you have any soul at all you will get torn up looking at this boy and read the article. Compassion is powerful.

But interestingly Jesus doesn't have compassion on the crowds because they are blind or lepers or starving. Jesus has compassion because they are like sheep without a shepherd.

Sheep don't know what they need. And if not directed to what is actually good for them they are prone to get distracted by whatever is right in front of them and wander off into danger.

³ <http://nationalpost.com/holy-post/religion-not-important-to-most-canadians-although-majority-believe-in-god-poll> (Accessed March 9, 2018)

And sheep don't have any natural defence mechanism, except smelling like sheep. But if you happen to be a wolf or a lion then that's about as deterring as the smell of bacon wafting into the McDonalds parking lot at noon. Sheep without a shepherd are vulnerable to pursuing what they don't need.

And Jesus sees this, and it tears Him up.

And the point of this paragraph is that what tears up Jesus is supposed to tear up His followers as well. So we need to ask ourselves, "Do I hurt when I rub shoulders with the people that Jesus hurts for? Do I feel pity for my unbelieving neighbours, colleagues and classmates?" They might not seem broken on the outside, but Jesus says they are like sheep without a shepherd. They are spending their lives pursuing things they don't need and won't satisfy. They are chasing the gold at the end of the rainbow. And it tears Jesus up to see people pursuing what they think is going to make them happy, when He knows how it is going to end.

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So maybe the people God has put on your mind are giving themselves to chasing the bigger house and the faster car. Maybe they are pursuing the next degree or the perfect body. Maybe they are hunting the next relationship. None of these things are bad in and of themselves, but when they become ultimate pursuits Jesus says people like this are sheep without a shepherd, and He wants this to tear us up.

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So, if you aren't following Jesus here today then you are the sheep Jesus wants to shepherd. And what Jesus means by that is He wants to lead you away from chasing plastic eggs and towards what will bring you joy. And if you are following Jesus then the call of this passage is to love like Jesus did; to feel compassion for the ultimate wellbeing of your friends... That's the first picture in this passage. So do you hurt for the people Jesus hurts for?

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With the second picture, Jesus gives us something incredibly hopeful. He sees some amazing potential behind the brokenness of the people around us.

So in verse 37 Jesus turns to His disciples, to us, and says "the harvest is plentiful." Here Jesus wants us to get excited about what He sees. And He wants us to be dissatisfied with what we are currently experiencing. There's a ripe harvest to bring in.

Now harvest is a farming term. It's the time of the year when the farmer heads out into his field and determines that after spending months weeding and watering and guarding his crop, now is the time to bring in the abundance of everything good.

So it's not harvest when a farmer is walking through the field and he grabs a couple heads of grain and eats them as he's walking. It's not harvest when you pick five cherry tomatoes off the one tomato plant you've had growing in your kitchen and throw them in your salad. Those are good moments, but that's not harvest, at least not like the Bible describes. In the Bible harvest happens after you plant seed, and then 30, 60 or 100 times what you sowed comes back.

And this is the metaphor Jesus uses. Not only are the unbelievers outside like sheep who are in trouble, they are also like a heavy wheat field just waiting to be collected.

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Now hear this, it is easy to see the world as broken and desperately at need. Every time Trump does something crazy, or a new law gets implemented in Canada which makes it more difficult to be Christian, we see that the world is broken. But to see the world as ready to encounter Christ takes eyes of faith – it takes looking through Jesus' eyes. But that is what Jesus wants us to do. Jesus wants us to live expecting to see His kingdom break into our world any second.

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Now there are two things I want to draw out here. The first is that Jesus doesn't ask us to pray that the harvest will ripen. This means when Jesus looks out at the people we are praying for, the names you are pinning to the cross, He doesn't see people who need to be drawn to Himself. What he sees are people who are already being drawn to Himself. That's why He has put them on our mind. The Lord of the harvest has already been working in them, and they are ready to be brought into the kingdom.

Now that's a picture I don't think we are used to seeing. We see people who have walls built between themselves and Jesus. They've got excuses for why they can't believe. They've got sin in their lives they don't want to give up, and things they would rather be spending their time and energy doing. We are not prone to seeing harvest. But those are our eyes not Jesus' eyes.

And so the second thing to draw out here is what Jesus asks us to pray for. He says: "Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into His harvest field."

So Jesus sees the brokenness of our world. None of that is lost on Him. And He doesn't just see it, it tears Him up. He is filled with compassion for the lost. And He also sees an incredible potential for the lost to be brought into His kingdom. And so He calls His people to ask God to send out workers into His harvest fields.

Now this is a bit of a weird picture. It's strange that the farm hands should have to ask the owner of the field to fix the shortage of reapers. I mean doesn't God know that there are a shortage of reapers? How come we are supposed to beg for this?

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Well there is only one answer to this, and that answer brings us right back to the sheep without a shepherd thing. God knows we don't always pursue what we need. So He doesn't want to provide the fix for our problems, He wants to **be** the fix for our problems. He wants relationship with us. And so He wants us to pray. And when we do that we get to witness Him working.

You see God gets His harvest. God is building His kingdom. He hasn't left this up to us. He isn't sitting up in heaven worrying that we are going to drop the ball and His harvest is going to go to waste. Friends, you and I aren't big enough to hurt God's plans. All the people in the world aren't big enough to hurt God's plans! God is sovereign. God gets what He wants.

But in this case He wants two things, first, He wants the harvest, which is more people being brought into living their lives the way He designed us to live in the beginning – walking with Him and enjoying His rule.

But secondarily God also wants us come along for the ride. He wants us to witness His power at work in our city, and in the lives of our friends. God wants us to experience His harvest. And there is nothing more exciting than getting to watch Jesus transform someone's life.

And that's what Jesus invites us to pray for. He turned to His disciples and said "pray that God will send workers into His harvest." And then the next verse - chapter 10 verse 1 – says: He called His twelve to Himself and gave them the authority to accomplish the very thing He had told them to pray for. He gave them authority to cast out impure spirits and to heal disease. He gave them the authority to bring in the harvest.

And we are those workers today. Friends, God never calls us to do anything He hasn't also empowered us to do. And so it is no mistake that you are who you are. And it is no mistake that you are where you are. God has specifically chosen you and me to be part of bringing in the Prince George harvest. And so He asks us to pray that He will send us out. He asks us to pray something like: Father, may 2018 be the year that we get to see Your Spirit fall on PG and transform the city, and may You use us to accomplish this.

Will you pray for this?

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I love you guys. Let me pray for us.