

# ACTS

HARVEST PRAYER – STEPHEN VENABLE

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## I. THE NATIONS

*“After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them on ahead of him, two by two, into every town and place where he himself was about to go. And he said to them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.” (Luke 10:1–2)*

### A. The Context and the Crisis

#### 1. The Harvest of the Nations

- a. The words of Jesus in their original context are clearly directed toward the nation of Israel during the final stages of His public ministry before His crucifixion. Yet when we set them against the broader biblical backdrop, a transcendent meaning and timeless application clearly emerges. There is indeed a harvest of the nations on the horizon.

*“For behold, in those days and at that time, when I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem, I will gather all the nations and bring them down to the valley of Jehoshaphat. Then I will enter into judgment with them there...Proclaim this among the nations: Prepare a war; rouse the mighty men! Let all the soldiers draw near, let them come up! Beat your plowshares into swords and your pruning hooks into spears; Let the weak say, “I am a mighty man.” Hasten and come, all you surrounding nations, and gather yourselves there. Bring down, O LORD, Your mighty ones. Let the nations be aroused and come up to the valley of Jehoshaphat, for there I will sit to judge all the surrounding nations. Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Come, tread, for the wine press is full; The vats overflow, for their wickedness is great. Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision.” Joel 3:1–14*

*“Then I looked, and behold, a white cloud, and sitting on the cloud was one like a son of man, having a golden crown on His head and a sharp sickle in His hand. And another angel came out of the temple, crying out with a loud voice to Him who sat on the cloud, “Put in your sickle and reap, for the hour to reap has come, because the harvest of the earth is ripe.” Then He who sat on the cloud swung His sickle over the earth, and the earth was reaped. And another angel came out of the temple which is in heaven, and he also had a sharp sickle. Then another angel, the one who has power over fire, came out from the altar; and he called with a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle, saying, “Put in your sharp sickle and gather the clusters from the vine of the earth, because her grapes are ripe.” So the angel swung his sickle to the earth and gathered the clusters from the vine of the earth, and threw them into the great wine press of the wrath of God. And the wine press was trodden outside the city, and blood came out from the wine press, up to the horses’ bridles, for a distance of two hundred miles.” Revelation 14:14–20*

- b. Knowing the certainty of the harvest of wickedness that will come about when He judges the nations at the Day of the LORD, Jesus is gripped with compassion (Jonah 4:11, Matt. 9:36-38) and calls us to give heed to the potential for a plentiful harvest of righteousness in these days of His amnesty (2 Pet. 3:15).
- c. As we cast our eyes upon the nations, we behold billions of souls who have never heard the gospel and do not worship their Maker who came in the flesh and was crucified on their behalf.
- d. Then, if we consider the tiny percentage of the missionary work force laboring in the regions of the earth where a witness of Jesus is most needed, we find ourselves in caught in the grip of the words of Jesus - *the harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few*.

#### 2. The Great Imbalance

We live in an age of information. Our over-saturation with figures and statistics means that we need to be very intentional about actually binding our hearts to the reality behind these numbers.<sup>1</sup>

##### a. Unreached People Groups and Population<sup>2</sup>

There are around 7,000 unreached people groups consisting of roughly 3.5 billion people. This represents approximately 50% of the total population of the earth.

##### b. Global Christian Population

There are approximately 2.2 billion Christians worldwide (Catholic, Orthodox, Coptic, Protestant, etc.). There are around 78,000 Evangelical Christians for every unreached people group, and 900 Evangelical churches for every unreached people group.

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<sup>1</sup> The figures in this section are based directly on statistics from [www.travelingteam.org/stats](http://www.travelingteam.org/stats), [www.joshuaproject.org](http://www.joshuaproject.org), and [www.grd.imb.org](http://www.grd.imb.org).

<sup>2</sup> A people group is defined sociologically as cultural entity that is distinct or unique based on ethnic, linguistic, or geographic limitations to the spreading of the gospel. A people group is deemed *unreached* when less than 2% of the population is evangelical Christian.

## c. Missionaries and Workers

There are an estimated 400,000 missionaries in the earth, and 5.5 million full-time Christian workers. Approximately 13,000 missionaries (3%) and 20,000 local workers (.37 %) currently labor among the unreached. Therefore, of nearly 6 million in vocational ministry, only 33,000 (.6 %) are focused on the 50% of the earth's population that is considered unreached.

## d. Conclusions

The number of those focused specifically on the evangelization of the unreached people groups of the earth is .0015% of the total Christian population in the world. If everyone is obeying God's 'calling', then God is calling 99.9985 % of His people on the earth to either stay exactly where they are or to minister to the 50% of the earth's population with a significantly greater access to the gospel. When we compare this to the final words of Jesus before His ascension, we must realize that we are facing an issue of almost incomprehensible disobedience on the part of the Church. Truly, *the laborers are few*.

***And Jesus...spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Matthew 28:18–20***

## B. The Remedy

## 1. The Prescription from Heaven

a. We must brace ourselves for what follows next. Jesus does not fall silent after identifying this grim crisis. If the Maker of all things took on flesh and uttered a remedy to the grave, treasonous plight of the unregenerate nations, would we not be wise to give it the utmost attention? Should we not direct all of our energies toward the great "answer" to this worldwide problem with eternal consequences?

b. Would not our chief concern be to make sure that no matter what the cost, we would not neglect the prescription offered from heaven to the horrific epidemic of blasphemy and idolatry that fills the earth?

***And he said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." Luke 10:1–2***

c. *Pray!* The sole response to the lack of laborers that was specifically commanded by Jesus was *prayer*. There it stands, in its simplicity and singularity, challenging all of the complicated apparatus of the modern missions world.

## 2. The Testimony of the Fathers

*"Every step in the progress of missions is directly traceable to prayer."* A.T. Pierson

*"Prayer is the mighty engine that is to move the missionary work."* A.B. Simpson

*"The history of missions is the history of answered prayer. It is the key to the whole mission problem. All human means are secondary."* Samuel Zwemer

## II. HARVEST PRAYER

## A. Praying for the Laborers - the New Testament Pattern

1. The example and instruction given by the New Testament is consistently to *pray for the church* and for *the messengers sent out by the church*. Paul offers prayer for believers in various cities and then requests prayer from them for his ministry of proclamation. This agrees exactly with the specific nature of the command of Jesus. The nations will be reached through human vessels (Acts 13:2-3, Rom. 10:9-17).

2. In 1792 the Missionary Baptist Society was founded in England at the home of Andrew Fuller. As a small band of men spoke of the 'heathen nations' and compared them to the dark abyss of a mine, William Carey uttered the famous words, *"I will go down, but you must hold the rope."* The next year Carey set sail for India with his wife and son. This is a picture of our duty in intercession.

## B. Workmen Approved – Embracing a High Vision in Prayer

1. The crisis of laborers is not merely a quantitative problem but also a qualitative one. A willing, warm body does not constitute a laborer. Unwillingness is surely a mountainous obstacle in our generation, but Jesus is searching for workman approved who are motivated by His fame, yoked to His compassion, and filled with *power* and *truth* (2 Tim. 2:15, Phil. 2:20-21).

2. Paul and Silas turned the world upside down (Acts 17:6) and were so effective as frontier missionaries that Paul said there was no longer any work for him in Asia Minor (Rom. 15:22). We need unction in prayer unto unction in preaching that removes all neutrality and results in cutting of hearts and gnashing of teeth.