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Harvest Joy and Labor

John 4:31-38

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, saying, "Rabbi, eat." But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." So the disciples said to one another, "Has anyone brought him something to eat?" Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work. Do you not say, 'There are yet four months, then comes the harvest'? Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest. Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."

Let's talk about the harvest. Harvest basically has two sort of elements to it. The first one is that harvest is a time of labor. It's still a time of labor as God is pouring out his grace and fruit is being born. We're to be a part of working in that process with him. But harvest is also a time, and it's equated all through the scriptures as a time of great celebration and great joy. And of course, the joy of the harvest is hard to overlook.

Jesus said this: "The one who reaps." You're experiencing the fruit of the Spirit. They're receiving wages right now. If you have ever tasted of the love of God, the peace of God, the joy of God, the gentleness of God, you're walking in the fruit right now. You're enjoying the wages of God's work in your life, your cooperation with him. You're gathering up fruit for all eternity. You can celebrate in it. You can enjoy it. You can walk in the Spirit, the love and joy and peace of God.

And this is happening so that the sower, the persons and the people who sowed into you, and you as a reaper can rejoice together. The kingdom of God should be a people who are maturing together and celebrating together, enjoying God together.

I can't tell you how many churches I've gone into and there is very little joy, very little joy. Enthusiasm means "God within," in Theos. I want to tell you something. I grew up a very serious gentleman, and you might be able to tell from the way I approach things. And I would call myself a realist. My wife would have called me, when we got married, more of a pessimist.

And I'll just tell you this: I married one of the most joyful people I've ever met. She was up here in joy. I was down here in realism, bordering on pessimism. When you spend a lot of time in the presence of a

persevering, joyful person, you either join them or you stay away. And God, I think, knew that I needed a steady dose of joy in my life to rise up into the joyful hope that he made for me. And so he gave me a wife with unquenchable joy.

Friends, this is what God wants for his church, for his church to be a place that's abounding in love and joy and peace. There is no end to our ability to grow in these things, welling up on into eternity where that's what we will experience forever. And God wants us to taste the fruits of it now and celebrate it together and enjoy it together.

And what would it be like if Nazareth is a church that becomes the most joyful community of faith possible? I can only guess that visitors would come in here and say, "I want a little of this joy. I want some of this peace." And not only that, cultivating joy is good for us. King Solomon said, "A broken spirit dries up the bones, but a joyful heart," one who will experience the joy of God, "it's good medicine." Makes your bones healthy, makes your muscles strong.

This will not come from the world, friends. It's a supernatural fruit that can come into our lives. Nehemiah said something about this. During his time, the city of Jerusalem was ravaged by the violence of this earth. God's people were decimated and put into outcast status. Nehemiah was led by God back to Jerusalem to build the wall, and with God's help, the wall was built in 52 days. People lived in the city and they were excited, but they were nervous because they disobeyed God for so long.

And so God called Ezra the priest to gather the people together and read God's law to them. And as they heard God's law, they saw how clearly they'd strayed from God. And that's why they had all of this hardship in their lives. And as he read the law to them, they began to weep and be deeply sorrowful before God.

But Nehemiah and Ezra said this: "No, God has brought us back. He's bringing us together. He wants us to grow in him." And so Ezra said to them, here's what he said to the people: "Go your way. Eat good food, drink good drink. Send portions from what God has provided you to those who have nothing. This day is holy to the Lord." And then he said this: "The joy of the Lord is your strength." It's your strength.

Friends, cultivating a heart of joy is cultivating a spiritual tenacity and a spiritual strength. I've seen it in my wife. Early on, I tried to snuff it out. It's stronger than me. This joy is unquenchable, full of glory. Jesus had it even when he went to the cross. "For the joy of the Lord, for the joy set before him, he endured the cross, scorning its shame." Why? Because of the strength he had in knowing where God was taking him.

Joy cultivated, friends. Oh, I need more of it. Lord, would you bear more of this fruit in me? Would you bear more of this fruit? I love the joy of Nazareth, but it can be more. I like the peace that's settling in around Nazareth, but it can be more. I like the grace and love that's flowing in between relationships here, the patience, the kindness, the goodness, the gentleness. But we can have more.

And the more we get and the more the spiritual fruit overflows, the more the people that come in here will be caught up in the kingdom of God because they'll taste and see. But this takes labor, friends. Labor to grow and cooperate with God. Labor to encourage each other. Discipline.

Jesus said there's something that can steal this joy. In Matthew chapter nine, he said when he saw the crowds, the world out there, he had compassion on them. He wanted them to find him as a shepherd, to usher them into this goodness of God. And so he was heartsick over all that was happening in the world, as many of us experience.

And then he said this: God is there, basically willing to grow good fruit in the world up into a harvest. "The harvest is plentiful." But he said those who give their lives to it are few. When a farmer comes to reap a great harvest and he doesn't have enough laborers, it's stressful. It's burdensome. It is tiring. And so many farmers, when harvest comes around, they hire more workers.

I remember when my dad would harvest and he would hire another guy or two to help us. It was such a joy doing the labor. When we would go out and drive along the combine and one gentleman was unloading and we had CBs and we were talking together, laboring together in the harvest. We would work from early morning till late night, but it was like joy because the harvesters were linking arms together.

So many of you serve in God's kingdom. We're so thankful for all the teamwork that we have here at Nazareth. But I'll just say this: it could be more. We could rejoice more together. We could do more together. We'll ask the Lord to speak to us about how to do this.

The Lord said don't panic about a shortage of workers working in the world for the kingdom. He said pray. The foundation of the good in this world moves forward with prayer. He said, "The harvest is plentiful." God is rich. God is abundant. He'll pour out his grace, his kindness, but he needs laborers. And so he said to his followers, "Pray that the Lord of the harvest raises up more who will give their lives to the advancement of his kingdom in the world."

Let's pray together.

Father, we thank you that you are willing to, in mercy and grace, still involve yourself with a rebellious world. And we thank you for, you know, what some of us have experienced as of the first fruits of the harvest, the power of your presence, the peace of your presence, the love of your presence, the joy of your presence. We thank you for loving communities in which you put us, where we experience kindness and gentleness and encouragement and patience as we need it.

But Father, we do ask that you would continue to pour out more here at Nazareth, more for each of us, so that we could help others experience the goodness that we know. And Father, perhaps there's someone sitting in here today who maybe you're inviting into your family to become a part of this labor in your work as a son or daughter. We ask that you would work in them to give them the gift of faith and hope, that they could trust in you for the forgiveness of their sins through Christ, and then also learn to walk with you as they receive your Spirit through faith and grow with us in these great fruits.

And now, Father, as we prepare to leave from here, I pray that you would help our hearts, our wandering hearts, be more bound to you and abide more closely with you so we could live more and more fully in the fruits of your Spirit, the harvest that you have for us in our lives.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.