

*No One Like Jesus: The Day Of Harvest*  
*By Jason Huff*  
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*Joel 3:12-16; Revelation 14:14-16; Matthew 13:24-30,36-43*

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Matthew 13:24-30 and 36-43. May God add His blessing to the reading of His holy Word. "Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?' 'An enemy did this,' he replied. The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?' 'No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.'" Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field." He answered, "The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear."

The Rio Olympics have been on in our house a lot, and while I'm not a huge fan, anything that gives us a break from the presidential race is OK in my book! The coverage has its problems, but NBC is very good at creating human interest stories. Nobody's portrayed as a rich kid who made it in their sport by having the best coaches and equipment and training money could buy. Every story is about overcoming adversity – whether it's a mother returning to the Olympics after having a child or a swimmer overcoming Crohn's Disease or Michael Phelps coming out of a difficult retirement to earn more gold medals. We like to get the scoop.

The problem is, as far as the news is concerned, the Olympics is everything. The gold makes every sacrifice worthwhile, but fourth place dooms you forever. But we all know better. Those stories don't end at the 2016 Olympics. Everybody goes home, some to normal lives, others to professional sports, others to more training for the next event on the world stage. The story never ends where we think.

Jesus' parable today is about beginnings and endings of stories. It tells us the reality of who we are, what we face, and why we face it. It tells us of judgment and an end – of evil and some people. And it promises a new beginning, a new start to the story. There are everyday issues in the passage, but its primary purpose is to teach us the realities of the Kingdom of God and to give us joy at what is to come.

In this parable, Jesus tells us that the Kingdom of Heaven is like a man who sowed good wheat in his field. But this man has an enemy who wants his destruction. The enemy plants darnel, a weed that looks just like wheat. Until wheat and darnel are mature, they look identical. Only when they are full grown can you tell the difference. When they reach their peak, wheat bows over from its weight while darnel continues to grow up straight. Ripe wheat is brown; ripe darnel turns black. And while wheat is nutritious, darnel is poisonous, even fatal in large amounts. The idea of ruining someone's crops sounds strange to us, but seeding an enemy's field with salt or weeds has a long history in many parts of the world.

Eventually – not right away – the servants notice the weeds and ask, “Should we get rid of them?” But the owner of the field says no. Take out the weeds before the wheat is ripe, and you'll harm the wheat; you'll pull up its roots and it won't continue to grow. Wait until harvest time when everything is fully grown, and then we'll separate out the wheat from the chaff. That way, the wheat will be mature and good to eat, and we won't lose any of the harvest.

This parable describes how the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of earth are stuck together for the time being. Sons of the Kingdom of God and sons of the evil one intermix in this world. We can't always tell them apart. They often look much alike. Sometimes, good and godly people do wicked things, like King David in the case of Bathsheba or Peter denying Jesus when he was afraid of being crucified alongside Him. Wicked people often do things that we consider good; Ahab, one of the most wicked kings Israel ever had, created a powerful empire that brought material prosperity to his citizens.

We see the same thing in the church as we do in the world; the wheat and weeds mix in the church too. Faithful Christians make mistakes and hurt one another sometimes when they disagree over points of theology or don't get their way in church decisions. At the same time, the church over the centuries has had plenty of ungodly people who nevertheless are considered upstanding members of the community who never fail to give their tithe and serve as deacons, elders, pastors, and church leaders.

This is both an earthly struggle and a spiritual struggle, and it will have a spiritual resolution. When the Kingdom of God comes in all its fullness, when this age ends and the age of the Kingdom begins, there will be a harvest. Judgment will come. Those who have done evil, who have not repented, who want nothing to do with God, who are weeds among the wheat, will be judged and harvested. They will receive their due punishment.

At the same time, the wheat – faithful believers, the sons and daughters of the Kingdom of God – will be harvested too. Made righteous by the Holy Spirit, we will “shine like the sun in the Kingdom of [our] Father.” Just as there is an eternal sentence for all who belong to the darkness, there is eternal joy for those who belong to Christ. We are made to shine! One day, we will. We will not always be surrounded by the weeds of evil and viciousness that populate this world and block out the light. The darkness will end and the light will triumph.

There are a million things we could discuss in this passage: the reality of judgment and hell; the nature of God's enemy and evil in the world; the Kingdom of God coming; the angels as agents of God's mercy and wrath. But we're going to focus on a few different aspects today. And this first one is a huge surprise: *the reason we continue to deal with evil in our world is the growth, stability, and maturity of believers.*

We deal with evil in the world and we wonder, "If God is really there and He really cares, why are things so bad down here?" Things are bad because of the evil in the world. Evil genuinely exists, and evil people – the sons of the evil one – are real. But even the wickedest people are rarely easy to spot. Hitler's Nazi party won the most votes in 1932; Joseph Stalin had a cult of personality in Russia where cities, towns, even a Peace Prize was named in his honor. We rarely spot true evil until it is full blown.

Yet the greater issue is not with the judgment of the wicked but the well-being of the saints. Evil is allowed to continue, at least in part, because of us who believe. The attributes that naturally exist in God only come to us through trial. We don't develop patience until we have to be patient. It is easy to be kind to a kind person; it's hard to be kind to the ungrateful. We learn to be like God in the midst of our struggle with evil in this world. Without the evil of World War II, there would be no story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Corrie Ten Boom or the martyrs who died trying to saving others. Without racism, there is no story of Martin Luther King Jr. and the movement to overcome the racial divide among us.

We learn from those who refuse God around us. I have friends, teachers, and colleagues that are avowed atheists and agnostics, and others who just don't care. They have helped me grow with Jesus despite their own outlook. They have challenged and honed my faith. They have helped me see more than my own perspective. They have made me a better follower of Jesus despite their apathy towards Him and their own evils. And until the end of the age, we do not know their final spiritual state. We are better for their presence with us, and their absence from our lives might harm our growth in Christ.

We've seen this in the life of the church. How many people have had their faith rocked by unnecessary scandals within the body of believers? In 1 Corinthians, Paul told the church to remove a member who committed grievous sin unless and until he repented and came back to faith. The church must deal with sin to remain holy. Even then, Paul allows that the person responsible for blatant sin could still be wheat if he came back in repentance. There is plenty of room for forgiveness and restoration.

Yet churches have split over carpets and pews. Believers have been excommunicated from churches over unimportant matters. Over the centuries, faithful Christians have been booted while weeds sat smiling in their seats. When the church has gone on weed hunts, the faithful have been harmed along the way, causing some to distrust the church, its leaders, its teachings, sometimes even faith itself. We maintain discipline in the church – we tend the garden that is the church faithfully, but we are not weed pullers or even weed spotters.

Why do evil and evil people persist? Because, as Romans 8:28 tells us, “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” Even when evil is at work, God is there, making certain His people persevere to life eternal in His Kingdom. Even the weeds in the church, through God’s grace, make the wheat stronger.

That leads me right into our second thought today: *there is an end to the story of evil*. Sometimes we get hung up on the punishment of the wicked, and we’ll talk about that in a minute. But I want to focus for now on the fact that not only does evil not get the final word, it will be removed from the story altogether.

Right now, you can’t turn on the news without the latest story about something evil going on in the world. From Orlando to Atlanta, from Syria to North Korea, we see death and dying, oppression and war, violence and hatred. The most successful superhero movies have turned heroes into villains and villains into heroes. Even when crime is down, in our interconnected world, we hear more and more about the awful things that do occur.

In Jesus’ parable, the weeds are thick. It’s hard to see the wheat through the tares. It’s only through the love of Jesus and the influence of the Holy Spirit that we can appreciate the good in this world for what it is. But it is there. The weeds don’t choke out the wheat; they don’t make it any less fruitful or good. The weeds are difficult and problematic; they steal nutrients from the soil that would make the wheat grow. But the wheat still grows as it should.

At the end of the age, all that evil will be gathered up and burned. It won’t trouble anyone any longer. Then the goodness of the wheat will be seen for what it really is. Evil will not just grow weak or faint; it will not just be waiting around for an opportunity. It won’t be like Voldemort or Sauron hanging around for another chance to stir up trouble. Evil will be eliminated from the equation. Evil gets no further story. Evil will be over. And those who belong in God’s Kingdom, the saints who have trusted in Him for salvation and been forgiven by our King Jesus, will go on and on and on forever.

But how long until that happens? Over and over, the psalmist asks, how long until our rescue? The prophets cry out, God, when will you save your people? The martyrs in Revelation 6 call out, when will you avenge our blood and judge the world? Yet Jesus brings in the current age when He purchased redemption for us on the cross. The first age, the age of the Old Testament, if you take the most literal reading possible of every date, is still over 4000 years long. God’s time is not our own. This age, the age of the Kingdom of God breaking into our world, could go on a very long time.

But what comes after this age? Eternity. Not just more time but time beyond time. We have no way to even conceive of it. It is life never-ending, life perfected, life without suffering, life of joy, life of wonder, life with God, life doing whatever God wants, doing good work, and being overjoyed to do it because the King of the universe has called upon us to be not only His servants but His friends. When the story of evil is wrapping up, when its final page is written and done and that book is done, our story will just be beginning.

C.S. Lewis described it well in the finale of the Narnia series. He's speaking of his characters, but it's true of every believer when the end of this age comes: "All their life in this world and all their adventures had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before." Jesus' parable proves to us that the story goes on without evil, and it will be grander than we can imagine.

That leads me to our final thought today: *since it's often impossible to tell the weeds from the wheat, we need to obediently share the faith to save others.* It's very hard for us to wrap our heads around the truth that God sovereignly chooses us, yet we also have personal responsibility. Nothing happens without God's permission, but His will nevertheless includes our individual decisions and responses. God plants the wheat, yet we have personal responsibility to help that wheat grow to maturity – by introducing people to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. This intermingling of God's choice and our responsibility can be confusing, but our call is not to understand so much as it is to be obedient.

God chooses and Jesus saves, but we are given praise when we obey our calling. Paul says to his young friend Timothy, "Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers." Jude, the half-brother of Jesus, wrote, "Have mercy on some who are doubting; save others by snatching them out of the fire." James, the other half-brother of Jesus, states, "Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins." Paul challenges Corinthians who are married to unbelievers, "How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?" Over and over, believers receive credit when unbelievers turn to Christ because of what we've done. Is it God's choice or our work? The answer is both. God has chosen to make us a part of His plan and purposes.

The fiery furnace and weeping and gnashing of teeth frighten and sadden us. If we aren't certain what we believe, we fear punishment. But faithful believers are still saddened that some will face such an awful eternity – not because it's unjust, because God is always just, but because we want for our family and friends and neighbors to avoid it. To be blunt, we should be moved by this story – grateful that God would finally remove evil from us permanently, and motivated that as far as it depends on us, no one connected to us will miss the possibility of salvation.

The servants responsible for the crop in Jesus' parable would have watered the fields and tended them just as they did before. They didn't stop doing their work because of the weeds. The harvesting job belongs to Jesus and the angels. Our job is nurturing the weeds and the wheat together. So don't give up on that hopeless case, that family member who is so stubborn to hear or that friend who thinks they've no need for God. Who knows what person we think of as a weed will shine as wheat in God's Kingdom?

As we leave today, thank God that you are wheat growing in grace and love bringing glory to Him. If you aren't certain of that, talk to me so you can make sure you will be part of the good harvest. And be assured: the story of evil will soon end, and the story of God's people, of His church, will go on forevermore, with every chapter better than the one before.