

THE FRAMEWORK OF HISTORY

UNDERSTANDING THE TIMES 3



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A REVISION STUDY FROM
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

The Framework of History

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Understanding the Times 4
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Contents

Welcome to <i>The Framework of History</i>	4
1 History Matters	5
2 Staging-Ground for the Kingdom	7
3 Seed and Sowers	9
4 So Much Evil	11
5 An Ongoing Struggle	13
6 Come the Harvest	15
7 Until the Harvest	17
Questions for Reflection or Discussion	19

Welcome to *The Framework of History*

We cannot understand our times, or know what we should do in them, unless we see our times in the larger framework of history. There is a framework of history, and Christians can know it. Jesus reveals it to us in the parable of the wheat and the tares, and this is the subject of our study.

The field is the world, where the Son of Man goes forth daily, sowing seeds of the Kingdom. The enemy seeks to thwart His work, but to no avail. On the final day of harvest at the end of the age, the Lord returns not to a weed field, ready to be burned, but to a glorious wheat field, infested with weeds, but brimming with fruit for the Kingdom and glory of God.

Is this our understanding of history? If so, then we will order our lives accordingly. If not, then we are probably allowing our under-the-sun contemporaries to tell us how we ought to live, while our under-the-heavens calling to the Kingdom and glory of God languishes without fruit.

Men and brethren, these things ought not be.

ReVision studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 History Matters

Another parable He put forth to them, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field..."
Matthew 13.24

The vanity of secularism

Living in a secular world is very much like what Solomon described as life under the sun: It's all about I, me, mine, and ends up vanity of vanities, and feeding on the wind.

Our increasingly secular generation, having, as it supposes, broken free of the shackles of religion, touts advances in human freedom and flourishing as its aim and achievement. Ancient diseases are being eradicated. The world is becoming a global village as the Internet, free trade, and educational improvements create new opportunities for people everywhere. Science and technology hold unlimited promise for solving the problems that plague us, and even for improving the species. Governments everywhere are becoming more progressive, and more devoted to achieving worldwide comity.

Some seemingly intractable concerns remain, of course – climate change, racism, the growing gap between the rich and the poor, environmental pollution, and the lingering threat of religious fundamentalism – but these will be overcome in time, the secularist confidently believes.

And it is his *belief* – his *religious worldview* – that fuels the secularist's vision, confidence, and investment of resources and energy in pursuit of the satisfaction of the self. Far from having escaped the confines of religion, our secular generation has merely *redefined* the terms of faith, and has done so narrowly, trusting only in the resources of reason and self-interest.

But in all this, again to recall Solomon, there is nothing new under the sun. Our secular generation is but the latest incarnation of the human tendency to be gods unto themselves. Such folly has been common to men in all ages; secularism is only the latest manifestation of the pagan revolt from God.

As such, the emergence of secularism has not caught God off guard; nor does it threaten His eternal plan. The more we know about history, the more Christians can be confident that, outward appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, God's plan for the ages is unfolding right on course.

Pin ball history

Human beings are creatures of history. That is, unlike other creatures, people have a *sense* of history. For most people, perhaps, history is a dusty, irrelevant subject that does not require serious attention on their parts. Consider a few typical responses of people reflecting on their own experience in history: "My life is out of control!" "I just can't seem to get a break!" "I don't know what's happening here or where it's all going." "How should I know? I couldn't tell you what I'm going to be doing next week, must less a year from now." "Why must you always bring up the past?" "After all, tomorrow is another day." "Seize the day!"

Many people live like pin balls; at some point, they were shot into the game of life, and now they are wholly controlled by whatever wall or post or bumper or gate they happen to crash into or pass through. They want to score big in life, but mostly they merely careen across the game board, trying to rack up as many points as possible, and hoping someone or something will be on the flippers as they head toward the black hole at life's end, to keep them in the game of life a little longer. No sense of direction, little control over circumstances and events, and little if any lasting results to show for their efforts.

This is not the way Jesus intends that His people should live.

The Framework of History

A defining parable

Jesus sketched out the framework of history, so that we could understand the times, where history is headed, and how we should conduct ourselves. The parable of the wheat and the tares (Matt. 13.24-30, 36-43) is one of Jesus' most defining teachings. It takes into its scope the whole world and all its people. It outlines the course of history from Jesus' own day to the day of judgment. It explains why evil and strife persist all over the world. It emphasizes the proper way to think about our times. And it suggests how we, as Jesus' followers, should be investing our time, talents, and energies until He returns.

As such, the parable of the wheat and the tares provides a framework for living that allows us to understand the times as Jesus does, and to know what we must do to line up with His rule at the right hand of God.

Why did Jesus tell this parable? Certainly, He intended His followers to embrace this framework, discern their place within it, and comport themselves at all times to realize the promise of this parable. However, it's clear the followers of Christ today have not grasped the framework outlined in this parable. In many ways, the Church today has given up on history, and has ceded the world to those who are committed to an under-the-sun agenda.

Either we are living according to Jesus' understanding of the times, or we are living at cross-purposes to the cosmic plan of Christ. Many Christians, content with a gospel adjusted to suit their own sense of wellbeing, and pursuing lifestyles admixed with secular thinking and worldly ways, do not realize that they are actually *impeding* the objectives Jesus has set for His Church in these times before His coming.

We will not understand the times in which we live, nor what we should do in seeking the Kingdom in those times, until we embrace the larger framework of history as our Lord explained and is directing it.

For reflection

1. Does history matter? Is some understanding of history important for understanding the times in which we live? Explain.
2. Do you agree that Christians today have by and large neglected history and ceded the world to secularists? Explain.
3. What is your present understanding of the framework of history? Where is history going? What is your role in that?

Next steps – Preparation: Let's see what we can find out about how Christians understand history. Talk with some Christian friends about their sense of history. Do they agree that an understanding of history is important for understanding the times and knowing what we should be doing?

2 Staging-Ground for the Kingdom

Another parable He put forth to them, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field...The field is the world..." Matthew 13.24, 38

It's about more than us

Secular people see the world in terms of their own interests. History matters only to the extent that it impinges on me and mine, whether for good or ill. Looking out for number 1 is not a spectator sport for this under-the-sun generation; it's every individual's calling and right.

Sadly, this attitude has leached into the Church. Many of those who profess faith in Jesus think of their faith primarily in terms of how it benefits them. Rick Warren was half right when he warned, in the opening lines of his book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, "It's not about you." Salvation is not just about us; it's about more than us, much more, indeed.

It's about everything.

Focus on the Kingdom

The first lesson to understand about the parable of the wheat and the tares is that it is not about the individual Christian life. That will be hard for many contemporary believers to process, since they can only think of salvation in terms of their next need, crisis, or concern. But Jesus has larger issues in mind in this parable, and only in their light can we understand our times and know what we must do.

Jesus declares to the focus of this parable in His opening words: "The kingdom of heaven..." This is a parable about a reality larger than all our lives, a reality which Jesus brought near and introduced into the flow of history. It is an all-encompassing, all-transforming reality, and it provides the framework within which to understand history and everything in it.

That reality is the Kingdom of heaven, or the Kingdom of God, which Jesus now administers from the right hand of the Father (Ps. 110). History is the staging-ground for the unfolding of His eternal reign of justice and righteousness, which He is increasing and will increase without end, right on into eternity (Is. 9.7). This Kingdom, Paul explained, is characterized by righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14.17). All followers of Christ are commanded to seek this Kingdom as their first and overarching priority in life (Rom. 14.18; Matt. 6.33).

The central story of history, thus, is not about you. It's not even about secular man and his fervent religious quest for self-actualization. The central story of history is the Kingdom of God.

A vast domain

Jesus received the Kingdom upon ascending to heaven following His resurrection (cf. Pss. 47, 110; Dan. 7.13, 14). This Kingdom is first a *dominion* rather than a *place*. It encompasses all authority in heaven and in earth, and exerts transforming spiritual power to make all things new (Matt. 28.18; 1 Cor. 4.20; 2 Cor. 5.17-21; Rev. 21.5). Jesus has given this Kingdom to His followers, in the Person of His Holy Spirit (Rom. 14.17, 18), and He commands His followers to seek and advance His rule on earth as it is in heaven (Dan. 7.18-27; Matt. 6.10, 33). That Kingdom has been advancing like a growing stone against the kingdoms of darkness from the time of the apostles to the present, and nothing can keep it from realizing the purposes for which Christ has given it (Dan. 2.44, 45; 1 Jn. 2.8).

"How can that be?" many will no doubt ask. After all, there is so much evil, suffering, and ungodliness in this

world! Whole cultures are closed to the Gospel, and vast segments even of our own society have blocked admission of Christian truth. Our secular world appears to be in the grasp of forces too strong to permit the Kingdom of God to advance much farther than the walls of local churches. Wickedness is on the increase, and the Church is threatened on every hand. Surely we should just group together, encourage one another in love, and hope for the Lord's soon return?

This, sadly, is the view of history, the Gospel, and the Christian worldview currently embraced by a great many contemporary Christians, at least in America. But it is decidedly *not* the view that Jesus taught, or that the Church has, by and large, embraced for nearly 2,000 years.

The Kingdom of God comes, in Jesus' words, with spiritual violence against the fortresses and redoubts of unbelief (Matt. 11.12; cf. 2 Cor. 10.3-5). By the power of the Spirit and Word of God, all the counsels of hell and every flimsy protest of sinful men collapse under the advancing weight and thrust of that realm of grace and truth (Matt. 16.18; Ps. 33.10-12). This does not mean that every human being is going to be saved, or that the Church will succeed in bringing all of heaven to all of earth before Jesus returns. But it does mean that a new era has begun, a new King is on the throne, a new power has come among men, a new ethic is established and spreading, and a new hope is available to all who believe the Gospel. And where that power rules in the hearts of Jesus' followers, it even exerts a restraining effect on evil (cf. Ps. 81.13-15).

Someone will say, "OK, but I don't *see* it." And that's not surprising. We have been taught that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is mainly about forgiveness and going to heaven, that the world is implacably entrenched in sin, that the darkness is going to get even darker before the return of Jesus, and that the best we can hope for is the comforting presence of God's Spirit to keep us against the inevitable and growing wickedness of the world.

But thus to understand our times is not to understand them at all, and it's no wonder that Christians who believe this way have proven ineffectual in knowing what to do to advance the Kingdom in our secular age.

For reflection

1. What is the Kingdom of God? What is the Christian's relationship to the Kingdom of God? What does it mean to seek the Kingdom?
2. Paul says that believers have been called to the Kingdom and glory of God (1 Thess. 2.12). What does it mean to have this as the primary and defining calling of our lives?
3. Why do Christians so easily fall for the idea that Christianity is all about them? How can we resist this tendency in our own lives?

Next steps – Conversation: Ask some of your Christian friends about their understanding of the Kingdom of God and their place in it. Share some of insights gained from this article.

3 Seed and Sowers

He answered and said to them: "He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man." Matthew 13.37

Great expectations?

In the Christian life, what you *expect* is what you'll *hope for*, and what you hope for will determine how you pursue your walk with and work for the Lord.

This is the essence of Hebrews 11.1. Faith – saving faith in Jesus – is the assurance of *things hoped for* and the evidence of *things not seen*. Saving faith produces an inward assurance that what we hope for in Jesus is true, trustworthy, and within our grasp. Such assurance guides our daily lives, leading us to bring forth much fruit of good works, the *evidence* that those unseen things are really true (Eph. 2.8-10; Jn. 15.5, 16).

This is the fruit of Jesus' rule in the life of the believer. But we will only bring forth such fruit as we *expect* Him to be at work within us, willing and doing of *His* good pleasure (Phil. 2.13). When *our* expectations line up with the expectations of *Christ*, the fruit of His rule will be increasingly evident in our lives.

All this depends seeing Jesus as He is and as He is working now to advance His Kingdom in the field of the world. And here the parable of the wheat and tares can guide us.

What in heaven is Jesus doing?

Many believers have what amounts to a deistic view of Jesus and what He's up to in the world today. As they see it, He has finished His course, run His race, and ascended into heaven. Now He sits back and watches the action unfold, looking out over the events of history to see who will believe the Good News and be born again. Meanwhile, He is preparing our eternal home, and getting ready for His return.

This is true, as far as it goes, but it's hardly the whole story.

The picture that Jesus presents in the parable of the wheat and the tares is much different. Here the Lord is active *in* the world. The Son of Man sows good seed into the field, from the time of His incarnation clear through to the final harvest. Though He rules in heaven, He rides forth daily on the earth, sowing good seed as He goes (Ps. 45.3-5; cf. Rev. 6.1, 2).

He pursues this sowing by His Spirit, working in the Church, by His people's witness of transformed lives and transforming grace and truth. Jesus as Sower leads the mission of the Church and the work of His Spirit in giving His people power to bear fruit and be His witnesses (Acts 1.8).

Every Christian is both seed and sower in the Son of Man's mission to blanket the world with the Good News of the Kingdom of God. Christians are the good seed of the Kingdom. When you plant an acorn into the ground, what do you expect? A scrawny understory bush, barely hardy enough to stand against a strong wind? Of course not. You're envisioning a towering oak, flush with glorious leaves, reproducing acorns in regular cycles to fill the ground around it with other oaks like itself.

Sown with expectations

When Jesus sows the good seed of the Kingdom, what does He expect? Little saplings of believers shivering amid the cold secularism of the age and the storms of unbelief, sheltering in the greenhouses of their churches, singing their praise songs and studying their Bibles in harmless clusters, away from the world and its woes, turning nothing upside down in the name of Jesus?

The Framework of History

No. Jesus is sowing the good seed of the Kingdom, for He intends that righteousness, peace, joy, and justice shall increase and advance throughout His field (Rom. 14.17, 18; Is. 9.7). As we shall see, the secular world is not a *weed* field, waiting to be burned; it is a *wheat* field to be sown, cultivated, and gloriously harvested in the Lord's time.

Since we are the good seed of the Kingdom, we must seek and expect – as Jesus surely does – that all the fruit and flower and force of the Kingdom will be increasingly evident in our lives, in every aspect of our lives, all our relationships, roles, and responsibilities.

And then we are to reproduce that glorious, transformed life in others, by sowing the good seed of the Kingdom into every area of *their* lives, until the progress of the Kingdom is increasingly evident wherever we raise the banner of our King.

Contrary to what many believers today expect, people will be converted to Christ, even the skeptical, unbelieving people of our secular age. Manners will change, conversation will improve, frivolous and unfruitful interests will be abandoned, foolish and sinful ways will be forsaken, churches will be revived, cultures will be renewed, whole societies and even the times in which we live will declare by the justice and righteousness in which they thrive, that another King rules the world, Whose Name is Jesus, and Whose ways fly victoriously in the face of all the self-centered vanity of our times (Acts 17.1-9).

If you do not see your life in these secular times like this, then you are not seeing with the mind and eyes of Christ. You are good seed of the Kingdom, with expectations of bearing much fruit, or you are not a Christian at all.

For reflection

1. What role to expectations play in the life of faith? Where do our expectations come from? What expectations should we have as believers?
2. Jesus rides forth to sow His field every day. How is He doing that through your life?
3. What are the greatest obstacles to understanding our times as Jesus does, so that we will know what we should be doing in seeking His Kingdom? How can we overcome these?

Next steps – Conversation: Talk with some Christian friends about being both seed and sowers in the Kingdom of Christ. What does that require of us? How can we help one another?

4 So Much Evil

“The field is the world, the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom, but the tares are the sons of the wicked one. The enemy who sowed them is the devil...” Matthew 13.38, 39

Hard to believe

Many Christians today have abandoned all hope of the field of the world blossoming into amber waves of Kingdom grain. Calls for hunkering down, retrenching into Christian enclaves, and fighting to preserve our remaining religious rights against the encroaching darkness of progressive unbelief, echo throughout the Christian camp.

A relatively sudden and widespread proliferation of under-the-sun tares has startled many contemporary Christians into thinking that our best interests as a community must lie somewhere other than in sowing, tending, and cultivating the field. There’s so much evil in the world that the situation seems hopeless, and believers today have turned from seeking the Kingdom to seeking a safer and more personal faith.

The proponents of under-the-sun secularism cannot explain the evil of the world, much less eradicate it; and, even as they decry and bemoan their condition, our secular contemporaries seem more inclined to adjust to evil than to repent of it (cf. Rev. 16.8-11). Indeed, *evil* as an idea seems quaint or strange or dangerous to our secular generation, a situation Andrew Del Banco warned must not be tolerated, lest evil, unacknowledged, destroy civilization as we know it (*The Death of Satan*).

No solutions

Christians must understand the problem of evil, and bear in mind at all times that the evil that sings the glories of violence, incivility, lasciviousness, greed, inanity, and self-interest everywhere in the field of the world is a death rattle, and not a victory song.

The Christian worldview alone provides a cogent and consistent explanation for the cause and persistence of evil in the world, as well as the effective means for dealing with it. Eastern religions, with their doctrine of reincarnation, should by now have improved the lot of most of their kind, by successive reincarnations into higher states of goodness. But this is not what we see.

Islam, insisting that *sharia* law is the way to a just society, has been able to persuade almost no one that this is true, except those it manages to cow at the point of a sword.

Totalitarianism? We know where that’s been filed.

Pragmatic capitalism? Do the words greed, corruption, oppression, and the like portend hope for a less evil world?

Postmodernism? Sorry, but postmodernism, on its own terms, can’t explain *anything*.

These worldviews – which presume to have solutions for dealing with the evil of the world – only add to it, if only by degrees.

Understanding evil

Christians understand the problem of evil. Evil entered through the devil’s temptation of our first parents, and it continues to spread and take root wherever his lying, deceitful alternatives to God’s truth are embraced and obeyed. The evil of sin affects the whole cosmos, which groans under the burden of evil, waiting for the

sons and daughters of God to liberate it from sin's baleful effects (Rom. 8.20, 21). Evil invades every human system – politics, family life, commerce, industry, international affairs – and plants the seeds that grow into the tares of self-interest, greed, and violence. Evil corrupts the arts, derails education, undermines relationships, spoils institutions, and even hinders the work of the Church.

Sin and evil are spiritual problems, and they cannot be eradicated by more education, economic reforms, or political schemes. Sin perseveres in the human soul and, unless supplanted by the good seed of the Kingdom, will bring forth the tares of evil to overgrow, strangle, and pollute the field. Evil will not be uprooted, but it can be contained; and this is what the Gospel of the Kingdom does, as the good seeds of the Kingdom take root and flourish throughout the field of the world.

This, in fact, is why there is not *more* evil in the world (as we shall see a bit later in this series). Jesus Christ has bound the strong man, and He and the good seed who grow up into His image are advancing the rule of righteousness, peace, and joy with ineluctable force. Not even the counsels of hell can prevail against them (Matt. 12.22-29; 16.18).

Yes, there are abundant tares in the Lord's wheat field. They take root wherever the good seed of the Kingdom yields ground or fails to occupy it with deep roots. For the greatest cause of the continuing increase of evil in the world is the inexplicable lethargy and the timid, self-centered worldview of the putative followers of Jesus Christ. The apostle John insisted that the darkness of sin and evil was retreating before the advancing light of the Kingdom of God (1 Jn. 2.8, 17). If this is not true in our lives, cultures, and societies, if instead we wring our hands at the continuing advance of immoral, indecent, wicked schemes and people, it can only be because the good seeds of the Kingdom have yielded the ground to evil and retired from the field to gussy up their barns.

Do we want fewer tares in the field of the world? Then let us sow and cultivate more of the good seed.

For reflection

1. How do we know what is evil and what is not? Should Christians merely “adjust” to the evil in the world? Explain.
2. Evil is ultimately a spiritual problem, and dealing with it requires spiritual resources. Such as?
3. The world may scoff at the Christian's view of evil, but should that deter us from holding fast to our understanding of the times? Explain.

Next steps – Conversation: Talk with some Christian friends about the problem of evil. How do they deal with evil when it rears its ugly head in their lives? Should churches be doing more to address the evil of our day?

5 An Ongoing Struggle

“But he said, ‘No, lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, ‘First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn.’”” Matthew 13.29, 30

Grow and sow

In a secular age such as ours, the challenge to Christians remains that which Jesus outlined in the parable of the wheat and the tares. We are to work the field of the world, looking forward to and preparing for the Lord’s harvest. When the Lord comes in glory to reap His Kingdom, those He has chosen for salvation will be growing and sowing in their own space, readying an ample harvest for His glory.

The presence of a secular age does not alter our mandate. We should neither be discouraged nor fearful about following the Son of Man into our own sector of His field, to sow good seeds of Kingdom righteousness, peace, and joy in the Spirit. Every Christian has been sent to the world as Jesus was sent (Jn. 20.21), and we must not allow the conditions of the world to keep us from fulfilling our calling.

We understand that this will be a struggle (Acts 14.21, 22). Spiritual forces of wickedness in high places are arrayed against us, and people committed to an under-the-sun way of life can present obstacles and challenges to our mission.

But despite the disenchanting, narcissistic, materialistic nature of our times, our calling to the Kingdom and glory of God remains (1 Thess. 2.12). We must work the field to which the Lord sends us each day, laboring with the Son of Man to cultivate the soil, sow Kingdom seeds, and nurture as much fruit for the glory of God as each day affords. For as long as He is pleased to leave us here, we must seek His Kingdom, growing and sowing for the glory of God, allowing no hindrance to keep us from our work.

Weeds in the wheat field

I grew up in Illinois, across the road from a wheat field. Every year I would watch as the farmer prepared the ground for sowing. Great disc cultivators would disrupt the hard soil, turning it over to expose the rich earth beneath – like Paul in Athens, stirring up the soil of men’s hearts by his many conversations and probing questions. Next came the planter, distributing good seed throughout the field, working until every square inch of that acreage was sown with the promise of wholesome, life-bearing fruit.

Soon shoots of new wheat would appear, turning the black soil to a promising green. At the same time, pockets of weeds would emerge here and there in the field – dark green and red infestations, portents of a struggle to come. Throughout the growing season, the wheat and weeds would compete for space, light, and resources.

The weeds would spread, blocking the sun from weak seedlings and taking over the ground they once occupied. Ugly, heady, and intractable, the weeds would increase and cast their seed between the rows of earth, as more and more pockets of undesirable intruders became established throughout the field.

Yet the greatest portion of the field produced strong fruit-bearing plants, which grew to bright green, waving shafts before turning golden, their heads bent beneath the summer sun, indicating that the harvest was near. Anyone driving past this field would recognize it not as a weed field, but a wheat field, from which a hard-working farmer would soon realize a bumper crop. And when the farmer finally came with his combine to reap the harvest, the good seed was gathered, while the weeds were trampled and crushed.

We must struggle

In just the same way Christians must expect that the weeds of sin will strive against the full flourishing of the Kingdom seed. We must not back down from this struggle, but prepare to engage and prevail in it.

What is the nature of this struggle? The devil and his minions are at work in the Lord's field, striving by many means to capture hearts, pollute minds, corrupt priorities, and infest words and works. They leach into the time of people's lives, substituting images of self and happiness for the image of God and His Kingdom, and making of people lives a succession of vain pursuits.

They will infect our work with an obsession for self-advancement, and replace interest in holy endeavors with frivolous distractions and dangerous diversions. The enemies of the Lord will seek to persuade us, with great humor and promise, that we are better to invest in selfish concerns than the hard work of sowing and growing in the field of our Lord.

The portion of the field to which we are sent is daily seeded with wickedness. As we come into that field – all our relationships, roles, and responsibilities – bringing the light of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ, we may expect the darkness to resist, to stand its ground, to become even more firmly rooted in shadowy beliefs and practices. We must guard our own souls from the attractions of the darkness, and labor to grow in the grace and truth of the Lord. And we must continue by every means and in every season to sow the good seed of the Kingdom, that those who know the Lord may grow strong in Him, and those who do not may at least consider His glory.

We must not give ground to evil. As Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn said to a gathering of Russian artists, concerning the evil of Marxism in their beloved Russian, "Let that come, if it must come, only not by me."

Let us identify and own our portion of the Lord's field, and prepare each day for the struggle of bringing forth fruit on that ground for the harvest and glory of Christ. The Lord's field, and your portion of it, is not a weed field, waiting to be burned, but a wheat field, full of potential for glory, if we will be take up the struggle, grow in the Lord, and go forth sowing each day.

For reflection

1. Have you identified your portion of the Lord's field, that to which He sends you each day? What is your approach to working your Personal Mission Field?
2. Christians must prepare each day to struggle against the "weeds" of this world. What does that preparation entail?
3. Meditate on Ephesians 5.15-17. What are the consequences of our failing to make the best use of the time God entrusts to us each day?

Next steps – Preparation: How can you improve your daily preparation for going out into your portion of the Lord's field?

6 Come the Harvest

“...*the harvest is the end of the age...*” Matthew 13.39

Looking ahead

The great advantage of living within a Christian framework of history is that we know the end from the beginning. Our Lord has revealed to us not only what the outcome of history will be, but what comes after that, and what we can expect of the course of history toward that “end of the age.”

And He counsels us to understand the times and where they’re heading, and to conduct our lives in the present as people who are already living as if that new epoch is already coming on earth as it is in heaven. As Peter put it, “Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner *of persons* ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat? Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless; and consider *that* the longsuffering of our Lord *is* salvation...”

The day is coming when the Lord will return to gather His Kingdom harvest and take it to be with Him forever in glory. Then the weeds of unbelief, rebellion, small thinking, sinfulness, and all forms of under-the-sun living will be trampled underfoot; and every unrepentant sinner, will, first, bow and acknowledge the absolute Lordship of Jesus Christ (Phil. 2.5-11), but then be cast into the eternal fires and torment of separation from God.

And the truly tragic part of that end of the age scenario, is that they will go into eternal separation from God, not pleading for mercy, but cursing God, insisting on their rights, and receiving only what they have all their lives desired, and therefore justly deserve.

The Lord looking ahead

What does the Lord expect to find when He comes? A weed field, populated here and there by pockets of trembling wheat, sheltering against the onslaught of evil and pleading for the Lord’s return? Hardly.

The field of the world is to be sown throughout with the good seed of the Kingdom, and the Lord of the harvest expects that field to be radiant with fruitful stalks, overcomers in the struggle against evil who have reached their maturity, are producing much fruit, and who bow in the Spirit’s refreshing breezes, in joyous expectation of the coming of their King. Jesus commands us to lift up our eyes, and see that the harvest is plentiful, though the laborers are few (Jn. 4.35; Matt. 9.36-38).

The Christian movement has grown steadily and increasingly, like a growing stone, for 2,000 years (Dan. 2.44, 45). Even today, as in the days of the Celtic Revival (ca. 430-800 AD), the Gospel is advancing in astonishing measure in the most unlikely of places, a phenomenon to which most American Christians are willfully ignorant.

For example, a friend of mine leads a ministry of church planting in the Muslim and Hindu world. Over the past several years, more than 75,000 seedlings for Christ have emerged from the sowing of the Word, and 3,000 house churches have sprung up to nurture them to maturity.

In China, the Church has multiplied by nearly 500% since the Marxist government of Chairman Mao drove the missionaries from the land a generation ago. Today, another 20,000 Chinese will come to faith in Jesus

Christ.

Revival is occurring in many places in Southeast Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, Cuba, Latin America, and the former Soviet states. Even in the face of violent persecution, the wheat of the Kingdom is standing firm and growing.

Meanwhile, here in America, the Church cordially allows itself to be sidled more and more to the margins of culture and society. The number of believers in Jesus Christ is declining in relation to the population as a whole – a recent phenomenon – and the culture and communities of the land show the ugly presence of tares throughout.

And yet, millions of Christians huddle in their churches and fellowship groups, praying they won't be "left behind," and longing for a specious idea of "rapture" from this God-forsaken age. Celebrated pastors pander to the self-interests of their people, promoting a "Jesus-and-me" gospel that the martyrs of the early Church would not recognize. Respected theologians counsel believers to withdraw from worldly entanglements – contrary to Jesus' example and Paul's advice – to concentrate on building safe spaces against the coming storm of judgment.

Thought of revival hardly enters the consciousness of most Christians, for we are comfortable and content with our personalized faith. What more is there to want?

Well, what about seeking the Kingdom of God? Pursuing holiness in the fear of God (2 Cor. 7.1)? Penetrating all our culture and society with the salt, light, and leaven of God's grace and truth? Turning our fearful and confused nation upside-down for Jesus Christ? Renewing the work of personal evangelism and living witness for Jesus Christ? Working for greater true Christian unity and ministry?

Ah, but these involve risk. We would have to see our settled occupations and diversions in a new light, as platforms not merely for self-enrichment and wellbeing, but as arenas for seeking the Kingdom and righteousness of God. That requires growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And that requires tears of repentance for our complacency and disobedience, and seeking the Lord to renew this part of His field, that we might resume growing and sowing in Him, despite the presence of the devil's weeds.

But knowing where history is going, and what the Lord is expecting of us, how can *not* do what we know He calls us to while yet we have the time?

For reflection

1. Does it matter what the Lord expects us to understand and do in this time before His coming? Explain.
2. Can we afford to continue our "risk-averse" approach to Christian living? Why not?
3. What does it mean for the Kingdom of God to come on earth as it is in heaven?

Next steps – Preparation: Meditate on Psalm 90.12, 16, 17. Use this prayer for the next week as you prepare to seek the Kingdom of God each day.

7 Until the Harvest

“Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!”
Matthew 13.43

The coming of the Kingdom

Perhaps the vast majority of contemporary Christians do not know what their Kingdom-and-glory calling requires of them (1 Thess. 2.12). We know that Paul says we are citizens and ambassadors of a Kingdom not of this world, and that Jesus Christ rules the world in truth and grace from the right hand of the Father on high. But we give little thought to the ultimate disposition or daily requirements of this Kingdom and rule, and of our place and duty in it. We live in the present like people who do not understand the times as Jesus does, and therefore *cannot* know what we should be doing.

A day of harvest is coming – the full realization of that Kingdom which is even now unfolding within the framework of history. The Son of Man is working to cultivate, sow, and tend the world as His own cherished harvest field. From within His Spirit-filled Church, He is sowing the good seed of the Kingdom of God in the Personal Mission Fields of faithful believers throughout the world. Everywhere that seed finds welcoming soil, it takes root and begins to grow, producing much fruit of righteousness, peace, and joy into all of life and culture (Mk. 4.1-20).

On the final day, when Jesus uproots and condemns the weeds that have ungratefully enjoyed the benefits of living within His Kingdom field, only the righteous will be left; only the good seed of the Kingdom will remain to populate the new heavens and new earth. Thus they will shine with the brilliance of the Lord, without any darkness or sin, radiating, with ever-increasing newness, the glory of God to the ends of the world, forever and ever.

Until then

Until that day, however, those whom the Son of Man has sown into His field, and who have taken root and are growing in Him, must resist the incursions of the tares of unbelief, by straining toward abundant fruitfulness in the light of Christ. Lost souls await the Good News of the new era of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Spirit. The creation groans for the redeeming touch of the sons and daughters of God. Cultures on every continent, steeped in the stench of sin, pine for renewal in the grace and truth of God. Our society sinks daily into the miasma of pragmatism and narcissistic whim.

The good seeds of the Kingdom bear the fruit of the Gospel to awaken the stony hearts of those God is pleased to save. Their lives issue in the good works of the holy and righteous and good Law of God, renewing the morals and hopes of communities burdened under the weight of relativism and unbelief. All who love the world as God the Father does (Jn. 3.16), will give those things they cherish most – their time, treasure, comfort, and convenience – as daily offerings for the Son of Man to use in cultivating the field of the world as His Kingdom.

Given that believers have been translated into the Kingdom of God’s dear Son, we must embrace the call to seek the Kingdom of God in all our words and deeds, and force our way, by daily struggle, into the fuller light of its growing presence (Col. 1.13; Lk. 16.16). Kingdom-seeking begins in seeking the Lord, day by day, through the diligent practice of those disciplines and exercises that bring us into the presence of God’s glory. There we may be renewed in the Spirit and transformed into the image of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 3.12-18). From there we go forth into our daily lives, making disciples as we are going and bringing the glory of God into every detail and opportunity of our daily lives (Matt. 28.18-20; 1 Cor. 10.31).

Struggle on

It is a struggle, true, and one, alas, to which all too many believers seem unwilling to rise.

Content with a narrow understanding of the grace of God, and largely ignorant of vast scope and comprehensive reach of His truth, or the reality of His Kingdom, too many believers practice a shallow contentment with being forgiven, hoping in eternal life, and enjoying the fellowship of their equally shallow Christian friends. They have little stomach for the hard work of prayer and the courageous enterprise of proclaiming and advancing the Gospel of the Kingdom.

So the Church in this country languishes, despite outward appearances, while the tares of unbelieving secularism root and infest and flourish ever more tenaciously on every abandoned or neglected patch of Kingdom soil.

Until the harvest, brothers and sisters, we are called to struggle, not to linger around the campfires of the Kingdom, sharing our cocoa and singing “Kum ba yah” together. We must take to the fields daily, growing in the Lord, sowing His eternal Word, resisting the progress of evil, and living ever forward toward the coming new day.

Let us take up this challenge in full expectation that Jesus, Who administers His Kingdom from on high, will bring it to increasing fullness wherever we follow Him faithfully, in every area of life.

For reflection

1. Do you think “Kum ba yah” or “Onward Christian Soldiers” defines the attitude of the Christians you know? Explain.
2. What should we do whenever we discover seeds of the world encroaching into the Kingdom soil of our own soul?
3. How do you expect to improve in your struggle to seek and advance the Kingdom of God until He comes?

Next steps – Transformation: What’s one way you intend to become daily more active in growing and sowing with the Son of Man? Share that with a Christian friend, and ask your friend to pray with you.

The Framework of History

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What do we mean by a “framework” for history? Is such a framework can be *understood*, should Christians try to understand it? Why or why not?
2. How can understanding the framework of history help us in knowing what to do as the citizens and ambassadors in the Kingdom of God?
3. Have you identified your Personal Mission Field? Are you working it as consistently as you might? How are you improving in this work?
4. Edmund Burke is reputed to have said, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.” Apply that maxim to the framework of history as revealed in the parable of the wheat and the tares.
5. What’s the most important lesson you’ve learned from this study? How are you applying that lesson in your walk with and work for the Lord?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

The Fellowship of Ailbe offers many opportunities for training, prayer, personal growth, and ministry. Visit our website at www.ailbe.org to learn more.

We hope you found this study helpful. If so, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship. You can contribute to our ministry by using the contribute button at the website, or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 19 Tyler Dr., Essex Junction, VT 05452.

Thank you.