

## GRAIN: A HOSTAGE OF WAR



So, war has returned to Europe. Six months on, eastern Ukraine is bearing its ugly scars, with the displaced numbering as many as fifteen million. Global eyes are on the cities of Mariupol, Donetsk, Luhansk, and Severodonetsk, and the regions of Crimea and The Donbas. Amid the noise of artillery we are reminded of the basic necessity of grain. (Map: sites. google.com .)

### WHAT WE KNOW

“Grain,” says the *National Geographic*, “is the harvested seed of [dead or dry] grasses such as wheat, oats, rice, and corn. Other important grains include sorghum, millet, rye, and barley.” It has been a feature of life since the dawn of history, and is said to have first been recognized and harvested in West Asia. The oldest grain silo known to man is in Dhra, Jordan, and contains remnants of barley and an early form of wheat.

Today, notes the American food company *Kellogg’s*, there are 50,000 edible plants on earth, but grain, in the form of rice, wheat, and corn, provide sixty percent of the world’s food energy. Since grain can grow in any climate, four of the world’s seven billion population are dependent on these three plants. When turned into wheat flour, grain becomes essential to bread, steam rice, and corn tortillas.

Grains have endured as a food source because of their nutrients. They possess the carbohydrates (a type of sugar) needed to provide the energy for organisms to function, and also vitamins. Yet, grains need to be supplemented by protein-rich legumes, such as beans. However, beside supplying food and alcohol, grains are used in the manufacture of cooking oils, cosmetics, and fuel (including ethanol). Livestock and dogs also benefit, consuming a third of the world’s grain supply.

### WHAT WE FEAR

Clearly, the war in Ukraine has got us thinking about grain. Russia and Ukraine export thirty percent of the world’s wheat. According to the Agricultural Market Information System, about twenty-five countries are reliant on the two nations for at least half of their supplies.

The ruin of much farmland, the conscription of farmers for the war effort, the cutting off of ports and sea



routes, and the consequent stockpile of twenty-two million tons of grain in the port of Odessa have been sobering effects of the conflict. It is claimed that Russia has shipped grain from conquered areas of “the bread-basket of Eastern Europe.” (Photo: gettotext.com.)

African countries have been alarmed, caught between standing with Ukraine and ensuring that their populations don’t starve. Meanwhile, countries indirectly impacted have soaring prices of fuel and basic foods due to the struggle of supplies to keep pace with demand. While we can be thankful that Russia and Ukraine agreed a grain deal in late July, Russia’s immediate bombing of the Odessa port does not ensure that a widespread famine will be averted.

### WHAT WE LEARN

In an age when the developed world takes so much for granted, and where the labors of the agricultural sector are increasingly hidden from today’s cement jungles, the concern for grain is a salutary reminder of how important it is. The crisis ought to reawaken within us gratitude to God for meeting our needs. His generosity flies in the face of our race’s sin and attendant chaos. Our culture of death reduces life to mere existence. It is time we return to God. Interestingly, he makes use of grain to encourage us to do so. Read on to learn more.

## GRAIN: A SYMBOL OF LIFE

Those figuring in the Bible would sympathize with the present fear of famine. They, too, depended on grain, laboring to cut, to thresh, and to winnow it. They ate its products much in the same way we do, using it also for wages and for currency. Famine, then, was critical, as was God's memorable use of his servant Joseph in resolving its desperation (Genesis 41:1–47:26).

Yet, from God's perspective, the greatest threat to man is not a want of food for the body but of food for the soul. We may die from the former, but we are already dying from the latter. It is no coincidence, then, that God uses grain—something so vital and yet accessible—to speak to our greatest need. Indeed, he includes the famine in Joseph's day to teach us that if he can save us from earthly disaster he can save us from greater spiritual disaster. Thus, in the Bible, grain is used in many and varied ways to underline the point. Note three of them.

### THE OFFERING OF GRAIN

Ever since man broke loose from God at the dawn of history, we have known sin and death (often by murder and war). Unable and unwilling to resolve our corporate revolt against God, he, out of his sheer grace (undeserved favor), stepped in to reveal to man how he may be saved from himself and the effects of his sin. The revelation unfolded gradually, but increased exponentially during the lifetime of Moses (c.1392–1272 B.C.). To Moses God gave the sacrificial system. It depicts how we may come back to God. Specifically, it taught:

- *That God is other than what we are. He is holy (without sin) and just (the upholder of his law).*
- *That man, having broken God's law, is unholy and is therefore unable and unwilling to return to God.*
- *That man, to avoid dying as a lawbreaker, needs another to pay his penalty. That penalty is death.*

Of critical import was the burnt offering. To receive atonement for their sin, Israelites were to offer to God a bull, sheep or goat, a pair of turtle doves or pigeons (according to their economic standing). As the innocent animal(s) went up in smoke to God, the Israelites understood that the coming Messiah would go through hell on their behalf. He would willingly bear the full weight of God's righteous anger against their sin, thereby satisfying God's justice and purchasing their acquittal, their peace with God, and their acceptance as his children.

The Israelites could never repay God for his grace, but

they could express their gratitude by an offering of grain. Significantly, the grain offering was not ordered but voluntary. It could be cooked or uncooked (Leviticus 2:1, 4-5), was finely ground with oil or salt mixed in, but was without yeast or honey. A little of the offering went to God, but most of it went to the priests. After all, they depicted Messiah's intercession before God on the Israelites' behalf. Note, though, that the Israelite gratitude—taking the form of a bloodless offering—added nothing to the atonement. We accept the atonement as it is or not at all.

### THE BURIAL OF GRAIN

When Messiah came, he fulfilled the Old Testament offerings, using grain to speak of the importance of his death. *"Truly, truly, I [Jesus the Messiah] say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit"* (John 12:24). Jesus was saying not only that he is as essential to spiritual

life as grain is to physical life, but that we can no more benefit from an uncrucified and unburied Messiah than we can benefit from unplanted seed. Just as it must enter the soil and be watered for it to multiply, so Jesus had to die for his work to bear fruit in our lives.

### THE ACCUMULATION OF GRAIN

Many, however, treat Christ like they treat grain, thinking nothing of him until they have to. Our greatest needs of forgiveness, reconciliation to God, and life beyond the grave are obscured by our fixation on the secondary.

To challenge this self-defeating way of life, Jesus rebuffed a seemingly honest concern that he arbitrate a sibling rivalry over a family inheritance (Luke 12:13-21). While opposed to injustice, Jesus understood that covetousness endangers us with God. It not only makes idols of the temporal and material, it holds us back from seeking God. Jesus thus launched his parable of the rich fool, intending it not as a harmless "earthly story with a heavenly meaning" but as a hammer to shatter the idol of covetousness.

Following a bumper harvest the rich man aimed at greater barns and a life of ease: *"I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years: relax, eat, drink, and by merry."* But God said, *"Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"* Jesus used *"Fool!"* not as a schoolboy insult but as an alarming revelation of God's view of the neglect of our souls. Jesus adds, *"So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God."* He was not demeaning wealth, but saying that there is a greater wealth in God which we take with us into the next life.



## GRAIN: A WORD OF CAUTION

One of Jesus' best known references to grain is found in another of his parables, the parable of the sower (Matthew 13:1-23). It is well worth considering, for it is Jesus' longest recorded parable, has the advantage of his explanation, and warns us against merely flirting with Jesus.

### FIRST WARNING: OBSERVING IS NOT ENOUGH

Matthew records how Jesus burst onto the scene. His ministry grew phenomenally. Not only did he teach with an authority that set him apart from the scribes and pharisees, he performed signs and wonders to authenticate his Messiahship and to reveal that in him the kingdom or reign of heaven had drawn near. Yet, many of Jesus' peers, fixating on his phenomena and following him in their droves, ignored his call to repentance (4:17, 23-25).

Jesus, though, kept on preaching to the crowds, healing many (8:1-17, 28-9:8, 18-34; 12:9-21). However, he refused to empower their unbelief, and thus began to speak in parables. He did so to distinguish those merely interested in the phenomena from those looking to him for the good of their souls.

The parable of the sower kicked off the new approach. Although its agrarian content would have been easily understood by those reared in rural environments, its meaning, being spiritual, was hidden from those content in their sins. Their fascination with Jesus could not, of itself, unlock the mysteries of his kingdom.

### SECOND WARNING: HEARING IS NOT ENOUGH

While it is true that none can come to God without hearing Jesus, we must not only hear his words but listen to what he says.

When, in the parable, the sower went out to sow the seed, Jesus had in mind the spreading of the word of the kingdom. In the immediate context, Jesus referred to his ministry, indicating that those truly listening to him were, out of their repentance, ready to receive him not only as Savior for their forgiveness but as King to sovereignly reorder their lives. Whereas the blood Jesus shed at the cross cleanses those sorry for their sins, the cosmic authority he gained at his resurrection, funneled through the ministry of the Holy Spirit now that Jesus has returned to heaven, conforms the followers of Jesus to the will of God. Jesus' parable thus warns us against picking and choosing what we want to receive from Christ. As sinners we are not in a position to do so, nor is it in our best interests to try. We desperately need Christ's Saviorhood for our cleansing

and his reign over our lives for our freedom from sin. It is, then, the whole person of Christ that we receive for our salvation—the one who is both Savior and King. We receive him whole or not at all.

### THIRD WARNING: RESPONDING IS NOT ENOUGH

In his parable, Jesus identifies a number of responses to the "*word of the kingdom*" (v. 18). They reveal that not any response to Christ will do. The only response to Christ worth emulating is that which produces "grain" or "fruit" (vv. 8, 23).

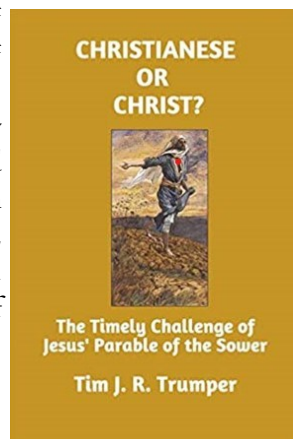
First, there is the *non-response*. Jesus mentions the seed landing on the path. He envisioned the path being as hard as concrete—sun baked and well-trodden by animal and beast—for the birds pick the seeds off its surface. Jesus refers to those whose hearts are almost impenetrable to what he has to say (cf., v. 19). They are calloused by deep-seated patterns of sin, and thus the devil quickly snatches from them the word Christ preaches.

Second, there is the *false response*. Jesus talks of the seed landing on rocky ground. Rocks lay under the surface, allowing for a minimal access to water but not for deep roots. Thus, the seed shoots up but is quickly scorched by the sun. Jesus refers to those who receive his teaching with joy but who do not consider the costs of belonging to his kingdom. Tribulation (stress or pressure) and persecution on account of the Word expose the fact that Christ's teaching never took root in the heart.

Third, there is the *stifled response*. The seed fell among thorns. Nobody planted them. They arose naturally in consequence of the fall of man. Jesus taught his disciples that he had in mind those who allowed his teaching to be choked by the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches.

Finally, there is the *authentic response*. In the goodness of God there will always be those who receive the Word sincerely. The seed takes root producing an abundance of grain or fruit, whether thirty, sixty, or a hundredfold. Jesus is not teaching that there are hearts which are naturally good, for the initial fruits produced are faith in Christ and repentance toward God, but that by God's grace and power there will be those sincerely receiving the Word of the kingdom who go on to grow as members of it.

While, then, we pray the world is not bound for a famine, Jesus calls us to examine ourselves as to whether we are already famished on account of our rejection of his call to repentance. If so, then let's get to the radical about-turn of which he spoke.



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## GRAIN: A WORD OF COMFORT

*Chris Baxter tells here of his about-turn, and of how, to use Jesus's words when explaining the parable of the sower, his eyes were blessed to see and his ears were blessed to hear (Matthew 13:16).*



In 1973, my career as an environmental health officer was progressing reasonably well. I was married and in good health, but I developed a disconcerting and at times painful bowel problem resulting in five weeks off from work. My health recovered after tests and minor surgery, but I was concerned about my life. Faced with a growing sense of guilt, I resolved to “be a better person,” but repeated failure worsened my feelings.

During our holiday that year, my wife and I visited the historic city of Chester (U.K.). Browsing the shops along “The Rows”—parts of which date back to the 12th century—we entered an antique shop. There I noticed a very large, old Bible tucked away on a corner shelf. With marginal references and footnotes by Rev. John Brown of Haddington (1722–87) and family records of the 19th-century owners Ephraim and Charlotte Miller, the Bible piqued my interest.

### GOD'S BOOK

Soon, I found myself scan-reading the Gospel according to Matthew. I knew nothing about the Bible, but suddenly I realised that the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are four contemporary accounts of the life of Jesus. This interested me, for in earlier years I had studied history and knew that corroborative contemporary accounts authenticate historical events. Yet, before I could check Matthew's text with the other Gospels, my wife, now ready to leave the shop, remarked, “If you are so interested in that Bible, why not buy it?”. Given its condition, the proprietor charged me just £2.

For much of the rest of the holiday, I studied the Gospels, cynically looking for contradictions between them. I found none that didn't have a rational explanation. Instead, the

Gospels and then the epistles (letters) taught me that all of us are sinners, justly condemned by God's holy law. I could not argue with this, for my conscience had been telling me the same for months. I thus came to realise that the Holy Spirit convinces men and women of sin, leading them to repentance unto God and faith in Christ as their Saviour. Jesus, I learned, hadn't come into the world to set me a good example, but to pay with his death for all my sins. At the cross, he received the punishment I deserve.

I also read that Jesus made a marvellous promise on the way to the cross: “*Whosoever believes in me, shall not perish but have everlasting life*” (John 3:15). The thief next to him during the crucifixion claimed the promise as his own (Luke 23:39-43). Convinced that he deserved death, he looked to Jesus, believing that he alone could take him to be with God. The thief was not disappointed. Although unable to do a single work for his salvation, Jesus assured him that he was forgiven: “*Today thou shalt be with me in paradise.*”

### GOD'S SON

If I wasn't convinced from the Gospels that salvation is by God's grace alone and is received through faith in Christ alone, I certainly was upon reading Paul's epistle to the Ephesians. There he writes, “*For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God. Not of works, lest any man should boast*” (Ephesians 2:10). Thus, by our return home from holiday, I could say that I had become a Christian. Yes me, a 29-year old rationalist who had considered it illogical to believe in the Creator of all things, or that he could atone for sinners, arise from the dead, and declare the way now open to God. Ever since, I have worshiped and served God through Stanton Lees Chapel, in Derbyshire, England. (Used by kind permission. A fuller version is available at <https://www.stantonleeschapel.org.uk>).



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