

## [Deuteronomy 26:1-11](#)

Harvest is a time of giving -it's a *thanksgiving* – and so without any further ado I'm going to explore two aspects of our harvest giving.

### **Firstly, our giving is a response to God's giving.**

There is so much God has given us. Under this heading I'm going to consider three ways he gives and our responses.

Number 1: The first-fruits of what Israel produced from the soil in the Promised Land were there by virtue of God's creation. God has given to all humankind a physical, material creation filled with good things that we need and that we can enjoy.

So our giving back to God here recognises him as Creator. Perhaps that's why people who don't even have a clear faith can connect with harvest. They are aware they are surrounded by good things, and that they owe that to the One who created this universe.

We know too that God cares for such people. Jesus said that his Father sends the rain upon the righteous and the unrighteous. This is a blessing available to all. It is what John Calvin called 'common grace.'

Initially, then we are giving at harvest in response to that general provision that God has made for all of us in this world. It does mean, though, that when we hear of peoples and places who do not have the basic necessities of life we are called to share out and redistribute the blessings of God.

It also means we take care of what God has given us. So it's entirely reasonable to have a special concern at this time about climate change. We hear how East African nations have had four consecutive years of little or no harvest, thanks to a lack of rainfall that is almost certainly due to the climate change for which the heavily industrialised and developed nations bear a huge responsibility.

In that respect, our giving at this time needs also to encompass a giving up of dangerous things and a move to other approaches. We want there to be a land which contains what God has provided for us, and which can be harvested and dedicated to our God in gratitude for his fatherly supply of all we need.

Number 2: there is all that God has given to us not only as Creator but also as Rescuer. The ceremony described in Deuteronomy 26 is directly related to Israel's liberation from enforced slavery in Egypt. We heard in the reading how

in the prescribed form of words the worshipper recalls the suffering of God's people in Egypt and their liberation at the hand of God.

How has God set you and me free? Not in a similar dramatic way to Israel in Egypt, I expect. But he has rescued us in other ways, and we can respond to that.

Sometimes on a smaller scale God rescues us from wicked people. In my first appointment I had trouble with some unsuitable children's workers. One of them was a Freemason, and he was chummy with one of the church organists, who was also a Mason. Eventually, the opposition of the organist became so intolerable that I prayed, "Lord, please change him or move him. I'd rather you changed him, but if he won't change, then please move him."

Within a week his house was on the market. He moved a hundred miles away. I would have gladly put up bunting to celebrate.

It doesn't always happen as simply and strikingly as that, but our God is a rescuer. We have reasons to be grateful and to bring our gifts in response.

And we also have our reasons here to pray and work for those today who we know need rescuing, for example our persecuted brothers and sisters. We can support them as a sign of gratitude for the freedoms God has given us.

I am currently reading an astonishing book. It is called 'What Is A Girl Worth?' It is written by Rachael Denhollander, an American woman who as a teenage gymnast was sexually abused by Larry Nassar, the team doctor to the USA Gymnastics squad. Later, Denhollander became a lawyer and those gifts and her faith in Christ led her into a position where she spearheaded the legal efforts to get Larry Nassar jailed.

Rachael Denhollander believes in a God who rescues, and she didn't want vengeance for what happened to her but rather for other girls to be protected and rescued. Nassar is serving life in prison, and US Gymnastics has had to reform its practices.

I believe Rachel Denhollander did a deeply Christian thing in offering the pain of her own testimony alongside her legal skills, because she gave those things in response to her belief in a God who rescues.

We give in response to God as Creator and Rescuer. Number 3: we give in response to God as Saviour.

Christians have taken the motif of Israel being set free from Egypt and used it as an image of God setting us free, not from what others have done to us, but from our own sin. Through Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection, we are the recipients of the most generous gift of love ever: salvation.

It is therefore also in the harvest spirit of giving for us to dwell on all that God has done for us in Christ and then ponder our giving. What can I give of my money? My time? My possessions? My talents, skills, and interests? Our harvest giving is not limited to what we grow in the back garden or the allotment, or what we grab out of the pantry. Harvest for the Christian makes us look at all of God's blessings and all of the good things we possess, to ask, what can I offer in response to all that he has done for me?

So that wraps up our first point. To summarise: our giving is a response to God's giving to us as Creator, Rescuer, and Saviour.

### **Secondly, we give our best to the Lord.**

I don't know what the Sunday morning of harvest festival is typically like in your home, but when I was growing up there was often a panicked realisation not long before going out: "Oh no, it's harvest festival! What are we going to take?" This would be followed by Mum scrambling through the kitchen cupboards to give my sister and me such things as tins of baked beans or anything else we could spare to bring to the front of the sanctuary during the first hymn.

I have to tell you that baked beans were a particular sacrifice for me. I was extremely fussy about vegetables as a child, but fortunately Mum had apparently had a craving for baked beans while she was pregnant with me, and she must have passed the influence down the umbilical cord to me.

But in all seriousness, I don't suppose that sense of 'What have we got to spare?' is all that unfamiliar on harvest morning. However, it wasn't what God commanded Israel in Deuteronomy 26. What the worshipper says to the priest marks a very different attitude:

<sup>9</sup> He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey; <sup>10</sup> and now I bring the firstfruits of the soil that you, Lord, have given me.' Place the basket before the Lord your God and bow down before him.

First-fruits. The first and the best is what Israel brings in gratitude for all God has done for her.

I think I can only remember two ways that 'giving our best' was codified into church life as a youngster. One was the idea of wearing your smartest clothes – your 'Sunday best' for church. The other was a certain assumption what constituted the 'best' music for use in worship.

It is of course much wider than that, and the cultural assumptions behind them. Giving our best takes me back to what I said earlier about the range of things we offer to God in response to his giving to us. I talked about money, time, possessions, talents, skills, and interests. In what way can we cultivate giving the best of these to our Lord?

It needs to be more than a 'spare change and leftovers' attitude. Our giving is not to be simply what's left over afterwards: if he's lucky, God will get something from us. Why does God sometimes only get the fag end of our lives? That cannot be right. It is not the spirit of the first-fruits.

Look at the way our military are rolling out and executing these precise and brilliantly planned exercises in our nation's life at present to honour our late Sovereign Lady and our new King. That is a whole culture dedicated to offering the first and the best of all their resources in service of the monarchy.

Now consider that we are offering ourselves to the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And we are doing that every day and every week, not just at one-off spectacular events. What is a fitting way for me to offer my best to my Lord after all he has given to me?

Cast your minds back just one week to our Covenant Service where we dwelt on how 'Christ has many services to be done', and how sometimes we can please him and please ourselves, but on other occasions we can only please him by denying ourselves.

So what am I delighted to offer him? Think for a moment. There must be something in your life that gives you great pleasure and nothing would thrill you more than to find a way to dedicate it to Jesus.

But also, where is he calling us to make a sacrifice to him? Is there something he calls you to do in which you don't feel comfortable? I've told you before how being a minister doesn't always sit easily with me. But I continue to serve Jesus this way, given how much he has given to me.

What about you? How can each of us give our first and our best in response to all that Christ has given to us?

Let's remember: it isn't simply 'harvest festival': it's harvest *thanksgiving*.'