

# THE CORNERS OF THE FIELD

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GATEWAY TO THE  
ETERNAL ORDER

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*by J.A. McCormick*



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# The Corners of the Field

*Gateway to the Eternal Order*



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When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and for the foreigner residing among you.

Leviticus 23:22



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# Chapter 1

**T**oday, I am going to share some thoughts about Leviticus 23:22: A provision for the poor. But I would like to consider an angle that is likely novel and unexplored. In particular, I will look more closely at the corners of the field and that which falls from the harvester's bundle.

To begin, I see no better place to start than in the beginning. Of course, the most striking thing we discover about the field when we roll back the scroll to the beginning of the biblical record is its absence. We see Adam and Eve. We see a beautiful garden with a variety of trees from which Adam and Eve may partake. But we see no sign of anything that resembles a field. In fact, the entire order of God's providence before the fall is one of receiving and cherishing God's gifts. The man Adam has planted nothing. His work is simply to partake of that which God has planted and to take good care of it.

In order to first gain a glimpse of this thing we call a field, we must fast forward to the fall. Upon partaking of the forbidden fruit, the ground is cursed for Adam's sake. He is told that in sorrow (some translations say "in toil") he will eat of it. And then for the first time in the record, we find a thing that we can describe as a field. In Genesis 3:23, it says that "God sent Adam forth from the Garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he

came and there we discover the first thing of Adam's making: a neat brown rectangle of freshly plowed earth, awaiting the sower of the seed.

So in order to understand Leviticus 23:22, we must first recognize that the field itself represents a fallen order. And we can surmise that all that is of the fallen order is less than that of the eternal order. And of course, all that is not eternal is doomed to meet an end. We call this end death. So, in Adam's choice to violate the eternal order, there was introduced a way of doing things that would bring death. I find it interesting that after 6000 years of tilling the soil, science and men of the land are discovering that this simple act of tearing up the ground is not necessary and that ultimately it is harmful and even fatal to the purpose for which the practices of agriculture were instituted.

Nature takes on average 500 years to create an inch of topsoil. But the erosion of soil that occurs due to man's attempt to take care of himself happens at a much faster rate. In fact, it is estimated that we are currently losing more than 1% of our topsoil every year due to erosion, and most of that caused by agriculture.

I recently came across a documentary film that really intrigued me. It told the history of an ancient city that was unearthed about 150 years ago. The reason that it was only discovered such a short time ago was that it had been buried in the middle of a desert in modern-day Iraq and it was the last place that anyone expected to find evidence of human life. The name of the city was Ur. We have a record of Ur in the book of Genesis as being the birthplace of Abraham. And interestingly, Ur was a part of a larger civilization called Sumer which first flourished around the time that we are told that Adam left Eden to till the soil and earn his bread by the sweat of his brow.

The thing about Ur that was so baffling to archaeologists was the fact that it was in the middle of a desert where nothing grew. There was almost zero precipitation in that area and yet as they excavated the ruins, they found etched in its artifacts pictures of palm trees and lush vegetation and its records indicated that it had once been a fertile kingdom that had flourished for millennia. The discovery that solved the mystery of its water source was the fact that the Euphrates river once ran closer to the city. The inhabitants of Ur and its surrounding countryside had dug irrigation canals from the Euphrates which they used to water their crops.

But the thing that intrigued me most was the reason for Ur's demise. It turns out that when you irrigate the same land over and over for a few thousand years, eventually the topsoil erodes away. And so it was for the inhabitants of Ur. Once the topsoil disappeared, they describe in their records that salt began to come up in their fields - a phenomenon that still occurs today in that region, and this, of course, brought famine and the people had to leave in search of other places to farm.

It is an interesting story, and it raises some pretty serious questions. First, is it really possible that something so basic and familiar as agriculture could be mistaken in its premise? If so, what are we to do? We do not live in Eden and we cannot yet see, much less partake of the tree whose fruit will make us live forever. And even if we desired to return, how do we get there? Is it possible that God really intends for us to live a life free from toil? Isn't that idle? Should not life be hard? Is there not more virtue in fending for ourselves? After all, what about a work ethic? If we did not earn our bread by the sweat of our brow, how would we look ourselves in the mirror? For truly we are Adam's seed and have inherited his curse. But then again,

perhaps it is time to finally begin the journey back to the place from whence we fell?

One thing we know - at least so far, such a journey has not appealed to anyone. Even the ancient inhabitants of Ur were not dissuaded from their tilling when the salts came up and they were faced with moving from their homes in search of more suitable conditions. We seem to be obstinant in this regard. There is a type of glory which we derive in doing it ourselves. Of course, not all can do for themselves. Throughout history, there has been the widow, the orphan, and the crippled and beggarly bunch who live upon the charity of others. These do not have the luxury of such high minded pretentions. They must live by gifts. And yet strangely, it is these who most resemble that order which Adam and Eve knew in the garden.

Here we return to our text. We are told that the corners of the field and all that falls from the harvester's bundle are reserved for the poor. But why? Of course, the most obvious reason for this is a provision for the poor. But let's look more closely at what it is that God is providing. If you picture a newly sown field, you see that it has certain clearly defined borders. The sower sows his seed according to a certain pattern so that more or less, the field is what he created it to be. However, as the years pass, the grain falls to the ground in and around the field and to some small degree expands the borders of the field and it becomes something more than it was at its inception. And though the landowner may account for his original rectangle, the expanded borders can only be attributed to divine providence. So that they are sown not by the farmer but by that invisible hand that holds all nature up. And though the farmer likely reserves more than this expanded portion for the poor, there is in it some vague resemblance to that pattern which we saw before the fall.

Let us also consider the grain that falls from the harvester's bundle. Each stalk of grain represents an opportunity for personal profit. And yet try as he might, he is unable to capitalize upon his investments to 100% of their capacity. And who determines which opportunities fall through his fingers, but again that unseen hand of Providence. So that, on the corners of the field and in the missed opportunities of the ambitions appears yet again a shadow of that which existed in the beginning, (i.e. a harvest of good gifts which the recipients have done nothing to deserve, some of which, it may be argued, has been sown and preserved by a power greater and more mysterious than that of the farmer.) But this *last* harvest is not for everyone. It is reserved for the poor and the strangers.

To understand why this group is so privileged to approach that eternal order, let's consider them more closely. First, the stranger. In Israel, the strangers or foreigners were not entitled to an earthly inheritance whereby they might provide for themselves. They were at the mercy of the "haves". And yet strangely, in a great reversal of circumstances, it appears that it is they, not those who believe themselves to be "the chosen people", who are entitled to the better part. Their connection to God's providence is more direct than those who can prove their ancestry and who claim to be the literal seed of Abraham. I find this interesting since over and over again Christ emphasizes the fact that a man must choose between laying up goods in this life or the next. And here we see that those who have no claim upon a "piece of the rock" are entitled to an introductory version of that which the righteous will inherit.

Second, the poor. The poor are a group of people who have failed to measure up to the great game of life - i.e. the pursuit of personal profit and success. In Israel, every man was entitled to

a plot of land by virtue of his Israelite heritage. So, the only way an Israelite could find himself poor was through misfortune or mismanagement. And since the field model is one that hinges upon the efforts of the man himself, poverty is and always has been accompanied by shame. For the industrious man, being seen in the soup line is the ultimate disgrace. He avoids it at all costs. And when he finally lands there, he is most often a broken man. Truly, it is only great loss that can persuade the circumspect man of the field to live by the gifts of God. I wonder if that is why the best men of the field still look with compassion on the less fortunate. They are all too aware that except by the grace of God, there go I.

Yet Leviticus 23:22 has deeper implications when seen in light of what Christ would say more than a millennia later. In Matthew 19:16, a young man approached Jesus and asks him what good thing he should do to have eternal life. This young man or his parents had obviously been very resourceful, for he was doing quite well at the game of personal profit. Christ tells him to keep the commandments. The young man says that he is already keeping the commandments and has done so from his youth. But it is obvious from the story that it must not seem like enough in his own estimation. Otherwise, why would he be asking Jesus what to do? And then comes the unthinkable. Jesus tells him that he lacks only one thing to ensure his part in that eternal order, he must voluntarily sell all that he has, give to the poor, and then become poor himself. Jesus tells him that if completes this last requirement, that though he owns nothing by way of earthly wealth, he will have chosen an inheritance and treasure in heaven. For by so doing, he would choose the most ancient and eternal order - that which existed before the fall. (i.e. to live one's life by the gifts of God and not by the strength of one's

own arm.) And of course, in giving his substance to the poor, he would perpetuate that eternal order by allowing others to live by the gifts of God. But this is the one thing that he cannot fathom doing. And so the young man walked away very depressed. And why would he not be? He has finally come face to face with his own hypocrisy. Whereas before, he might have been able to fool himself into believing that his outward efforts at righteousness were genuine, now it has become clear. He does not really want the kingdom of heaven and he knows it. He prefers that carnal security that lies in the illusion of one's own power. And that is a very terrible weight indeed.

In light of this story, consider now the great divide that separates the children of the kingdom from the children of mammon. It is truly a great and terrible gulf. I cannot help but wonder if this young man in his despondency was given a small taste of that which the rich man in Lazarus' story felt when he plead with Abraham to let Lazarus dip his finger in the water and come down to quench his thirst. I find it interesting that that rich man did not ask to go where Lazarus was. His request was that Lazarus meet him where he was *in hell*. Here it appears that even in death, his disposition remained the same. And the darkness and hypocrisy of soul which had caused him to turn Lazarus away when on earth, wasn't removed by death. If anything, it was made more firm. He was the same man. And it is this same hypocrisy that kept the young man from forsaking all in exchange for a better inheritance. Of course, I am imputing a motive in the rich man's words and I may be mistaken. Only God knows his motive. But what we do know is that Abraham makes it clear that for those who wait, bridging that gulf becomes impossible; "remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is

comforted, and thou art tormented. And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot, neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence.”

So we see that these two ways are irreconcilable and mutually exclusive. And I do not believe that it is so much God that fixes the gulf as us. Those who have sacrificed all for the kingdom of heaven simply cannot be persuaded to sell that inheritance for a mess of pottage. And those who have trusted in their own devices are equally unwilling to even consider the path of renouncement in favor of the promise of some unseen riches of eternity. But there is a darker side to the dilemma which manifests most clearly in the Lazarus story. For the rich man not only disagreed with Lazarus' station, he also despised it. And so it is with all things accumulated by our industry if they are not quickly dispensed of in favor of the gifts that God provides to his own. For all the riches that we think we accumulate only canker the soul and make us destitute in the ways of God's kingdom. We see this, not only in monetary affairs but also in the accumulation of earthly knowledge and wisdom. The Pharisees were rich in wisdom and pious pretense. They could quote chapter and verse of scripture and yet had no use for that life which had sprung up, apparently, of its own accord. The gift of Christ had not come by them and their own supposed authority. It was not the work of their own hands, nor the fruit of their fleshy minds, and so they had no interest in it. After all, how could following Christ possibly profit them personally? And so it has always been that the gifts of God are not only overlooked but violently rejected by those who have labored hardest to amass riches, whether they be monetary, intellectual, political, or religious. And the world stones it's prophets and imprisons its sages. For we are



too accustomed to truth and providence being laid out before us in neat rows. But make no mistake, this order of things cannot lead to an eternal life. In it are the seeds of death. And if we do not soon repent of our pride, we will meet with a fate that we do not expect.

In the years that preceded the dust bowl, many a field was plowed and cultivated on the plains of Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, and Nebraska. The price of grain was rising and in a frenzy to amass personal profit, farmers plowed under acres and acres of what for centuries had been prairie grass. The land was lush and fertile with lots of beautiful topsoil, ready for cultivation. The tractor-drawn plow was a fairly new thing and one fellow reported that he had purchased one and was kept busy non-stop hiring himself out to ambitious farmers. Nearly everything was plowed up during these years in hopes of cashing out on the grain boom. And then came an unexpected turn. We now know that those prairies suffer cyclical drought and about the time that the water ran out, the price of grain also plummeted. Grain stood piled high in rotting mounds in the train stations and fields were left bare and uncultivated - dry and open to the baking sun. And then the winds came and began to pick up what amounted to millennia of beautiful topsoil and pour it down upon the heads of every citizen from Colorado to Washington DC and further into the Atlantic Ocean. And before long, nothing grew. The prairie became a wasteland rivaling the Sahara Desert. It was a disaster of biblical proportions and the only way that any of the inhabitants of those regions survived was through national relief. Yet today, it is just one more event that marks our history and our survival is chalked up to the ingenuity of man. We have implemented man-made programs to make sure it doesn't happen again. Yet I cannot help but

wonder if it was also a message from the divine - a call from the garden saying "Come home, Adam. Can't you see that you are inadequate to the task of providing for yourself? Why will you die when there is plenty and to spare in my father's house? Will you make yourself empty now, that I may fill you with good gifts?"

It seems doubtful that many will before more such disasters have been endured, but I am hopeful for the long run. Poverty and hardship have a way of working on a man if he will yield his heart in the process. There is life on the corners of the field, and there is life in that which falls from the bundles of the ambitious. It is there for all those who will claim the reproach of the poor as an inheritance. And for those who see the field and the whole way of life for what it is, there is always the wilderness. Of course, there is no real wilderness left - at least no spot of ground that man's ambition has not claimed. But just beyond that which appears, yet lies a great expanse of unclaimed territory in which the industrious have no interest, namely the wilderness of one's own soul. It both beacons enticingly to the weary and looms ominous and threatening to him that has been nursed and coddled on mammon's knee. But for those who by grace have been given eyes to see, there is no other way, no turning back. For it is only in this wilderness that man can face his greatest fears and by facing them, discover those springs of living water which will quench his thirst for that which he once lost when first he thought that he knew better than his creator. As one who has spent a few years traversing my own wilderness, I pray that you seriously consider that which lies beyond the field. And if you yet cannot part with it, I hope that you will bear well the reproach of your poverty. Let it work upon your heart to make you humble.

I am under no illusion that any of the mainstream have any interest in what I have to say. But if by chance some good men of the field have happened upon these words and have gotten thus far, it may be that you, like the young man who came to Jesus are discontent with the fruits of your own works and are searching for something more life-giving than you have yet found through your personal efforts. If so, I am afraid that I have no better words than Jesus had 2000 years ago. There is but one thing left undone. You know what it is. The thought of divesting yourself of your wealth, be it monetary, scholarly, political, or religious, may seem unbearable, but if you will make the first step to no more than desire, and let that desire work within you and not cast it out, the time will come when you will find faith sufficient to the task. Please know that we do not have to die. Let us choose that life that is before us while it is yet offered freely for the taking. May God bless us all.

