

Why Is There Chaff in My Wheat?

And Why Is Revival So Messy?

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Section 3 of 9

What Is the Mysterious Relationship of Chaff and Wheat?

*When I see green chaff I'm excited you see
For I know soon enough, wheat there will be.
If the difference between wheat and chaff you can't tell,
I'll simply explain it; I know it quite well.*

Our scripture illustration of wheat and chaff comes from the Gospels. While John the Baptist was preaching in the wilderness, he testified that he baptized with water for the repentance of sin. But the Messiah would come after him. John stated that the expected Messiah would be mightier than he was. He said that he was not even worthy to carry Messiah's shoes. Messiah's baptism would not be with water, but with the Holy Spirit and with fire. About the baptism of fire, John had this to say:

**“His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire”
Matt. 3:12.**

What does it mean? John's disciples knew the reality of this illustration. They were familiar with winnowing fans, flails, and threshing floors. However, most of us are separated from the reality of agriculture. We have never held a winnowing fan in our hands or worked on a threshing floor. Probably the only ones who have are those few that have been fortunate enough to take a Holy Land tour. Now many of us have had this illustration explained to us and we understand that after the heads of wheat were picked they were brought to the threshing floor. The place picked for a threshing floor was always flat, smooth, and hard. Often times it was where the wind was funneled through the saddle of a ridge. At the threshing floor, the wheat heads were either broken as they were beaten with flails or crushed by a threshing sled pulled by an ox. The breaking of the wheat head frees the individual kernels of wheat and the rest of the crushed head becomes mere worthless chaff. This is equivalent to removing the shell from a nut or the husk from an ear of corn. Now we don't eat nuts with their shells or husks with our corn and we wouldn't be happy to eat chaff along with our wheat. So the winnowing fan was used to throw the wheat and chaff up into the wind. The wind would carry the lighter chaff to a pile farther off while the heavier wheat would fall in a pile that was nearby. The pile of wheat was valuable. So, it was carefully gathered up and placed in safe storage until it was sold or ground into flour to make bread. But the chaff was worthless. So to get rid of the worthless pile of chaff, it was burned.

It's plain from this scripture that the wheat has value. The wheat is what the Lord is looking for in our lives. It's the fruit we're working to produce for Him. When the Bible says that the chaff is burned with “unquenchable fire,” we get the impression that the chaff is not just worthless but cursed or damned for all eternity. It's bad, nasty, horrible stuff. We certainly don't want anything

to do with it, but does our separation from agriculture allow our interpretation to miss something?

Please let me tell you my story of how I became familiar with the relationship of chaff and wheat. It begins before I was born. My maternal grandparents homesteaded on the high Colorado plains in the early part of the twentieth century. Their first house was made of sod that was cut from the ground and laid up like bricks. The sod house was later replaced with a house of wood frame construction. My mother was born in that first sod house and raised on that homestead farm. The family lived year round on the vegetables they grew in their garden along with the meat, milk, and eggs provided by the animals they raised. The vegetables were stored in a dug out dirt cave. Any meat that was not used fresh had to be canned (cooked and sealed in glass jars). Field crops such as wheat, corn, sorghum, or cane were raised and sold for cash to buy the necessities that the farm could not produce. If you've ever seen the eastern Colorado prairie, you know that it is pretty bare grassland with hardly a tree to be seen. Heating oil was a luxury far too expensive for many early homesteaders. So my mother, along with her brothers and sisters, gathered "buffalo chips" (dried cow manure) from the pastures where their cattle grazed. The buffalo chips were sacked and stored in a shed until they were burned to heat the house or to cook a meal. Today in our artificially controlled world it seems that we're far removed from buffalo chips and a homestead economy. It's not even a dim cultural memory for Generation X. However, only a generation ago, many of our families were personally acquainted with the reality of homestead agriculture. Our ancestors had to understand it to survive.

When I was little, my family lived in Sheridan, Colorado. It's a suburb on the south side of Denver. My mother wanted my brothers and I to know something about the way things were when she was growing up. So she took us out to the place where grandfather had homesteaded and she explained to us what her childhood was like. The farm had been sold years earlier to a neighbor who used it to increase the size of his farm. Years of rain and snow had melted the sod house back into the earth and only the foundation told us where the frame house once stood. It was wheat harvest time, and mother had us pick the heads from some wheat that was growing in the ditch beside the road. The wheat stalks were dry and colored a light golden brown. Mother showed us how to thresh the wheat by rubbing the heads back and forth between the palms of our hands (much like the disciples must have done while walking through the field in Matt. 12:1). Parts of the dry brittle heads felt like mild little stickers as we rubbed and rolled them back and forth between our hands. It only took a few rubs to break up the fragile heads, and then in the palm of our hands we held what appeared to be near equal parts of wheat and chaff. The kernels of wheat were small, oval shaped and a rich brown color. Long stiff hair-like burrs, paper-thin husks, and stout gnarly stems made up the chaff. Mother showed us how to blow across the wheat and chaff in the palm of our hands. We'd start blowing softly and then increase the strength of our breath until just the light chaff was blown away. If we blew too hard, the wheat was lost in the same "wind" that carried the chaff out of our hands. When the chaff was all gone, we threw the remaining handful of kernels into our mouths and tasted the rich nutty flavor of fresh whole grain wheat. It was quite a treat for three little boys from the city.

When I was ten years old, my father left his job as a foundry man (making castings of aluminum, brass, and bronze) to become a Ranger (camp custodian) for the Boy Scouts of America. Dad's new job required that our family move sixty miles southeast of Denver to the recently purchased

2,600-acre Peaceful Valley Scout Ranch near Elbert, Colorado (where the camp was yet to be built). Now I was to become a lot more familiar with the realities of agriculture. My family was allowed to keep some personal livestock on the ranch and soon we had two horses, three burrows, four heifers, over one hundred chickens, two dozen ducks, a dozen turkeys, ten guinea hens, several rabbits, too many guinea pigs to count (they multiply you know), some cats, and a dog. Over the next few years, our heifers grew to a 25-unit (cow and calf) herd with another 25 yearlings and a bull to keep the whole cattle operation going.

That year I also began my first paying job as a ranch hand. I started by helping the rest of my family move irrigation pipe for the ranchers who sharecropped the 400-acre alfalfa meadow that surrounded our house. As the years went by and I grew in size and strength, the ranchers promoted me to more difficult tasks. By the time I was fourteen I was stacking hay. By sixteen I was operating the tractors and most of the machinery to work the fields: plowing, drilling seed, cultivating the summer fallow fields, haying, and too many odd jobs to mention. At seventeen I was driving the 1955 Mack semi-truck with a five by two transmission to haul hay. The years I spent growing up on the ranch had a definite routine. Springtime meant fixing fences and preparing fields for planting or summer fallow. June was the time for cleaning manure from barns, sheds, and corrals. We would spread the manure over pastures and fields for fertilizer. In July we put up the first cutting of hay. Wheat harvest came in early August and the second cutting of hay followed in late August. Fall was the time for the oat harvest, planting winter wheat, and branding the year's calf crop. Over the winter machinery was overhauled and the cattle had to be fed. Calves came in the last half of winter. Some of the cows would require help delivering and the calves had to be worked: vaccinated, dehorned, and castrated. In the middle of all that I had to fit in school, sports, 4-H, and a teenager's active social life. Then I still found time to get in trouble with my parents once, or was it twice? Life in the city may be glitzy, but in the country you don't have to look far to find something to do.

As you can imagine, my knowledge and understanding of agriculture increased quite a bit from all of that. On the subject of wheat and chaff I learned that every part of the chaff is very important to the wheat. The husk is the womb that covers and protects the wheat kernel while it grows and matures. The gnarly stalk holds all the parts of the head together and it connects the head to the stem and roots that provide moisture and nutrients so the wheat can thrive and grow. The burrs reach up into the air above the head, collecting pollen from the wind to fertilize the wheat. Without the pollen the wheat would be sterile, shriveled, and unusable. It would lack the living germ required to reproduce itself and provide another harvest. The wheat goes through several stages of growth before it can be harvested. First it is just a seed buried in the cold dark earth. If the seed contains no living germ, it will rot there in the ground. However if the wheat germ is still alive and the conditions are right (with enough moisture, warmth, and light), the seed will sprout and a sliver of grass will push up through the crust of the earth, out into the light. The roots grow down and the grass stem grows up taller and taller until it is ready to set on the head. As the head sets on, the wheat grass releases its pollen into the air and its own burrs reach up to collect the pollen released by other wheat plants. Now the fertilized wheat kernels begin to grow. They start out soft and milky, needing their husks to provide structure and to protect them while the stalk brings nourishment to them. As day follows day, the wheat matures and its color slowly changes from a vibrant green to an earthy brown. Then the long hot days of summer dry and harden the mature wheat, while its color bleaches out to a beautiful light golden brown and

its heavy heads bow down. When the wind blows across the field of standing grain, it looks like white-capped waves breaking on the shore. Tension starts building up in the head of wheat. The kernels are swelling to their maximum size and they're becoming hard. At the same time the chaff has stopped growing and is becoming brittle. Left alone, the wheat heads would soon shatter and the kernels of wheat would tumble to the ground as they're released from the chaff. Some would become food for the birds and animals, while those kernels that were left would become the seed for the next year's harvest.

The farmer must know when to harvest the wheat. We see that if he waits too long, the heads will shatter and the wheat will be lost on the ground. If he harvests the wheat too soon while the wheat is still in its milk, the head will not break, the chaff will not separate, and the kernels will be mashed with the milky pulp, binding everything together in one large gooey mess. When the farmer sees the white-capped waves sweeping through his field, then he knows that his wheat is getting ready for the harvest. He will go out into his field, pick a head of wheat, and thresh it by rubbing it between his hands. He notes how difficult or how easily the head breaks as it is crushed in his palms. He gently blows away the chaff. Did any of it cling to the wheat? Then he takes a couple of grains and puts them in his mouth. He bites down slowly to test the hardness of the kernel. Did it feel like it mashed between his teeth or was there the sharp crack of a hard, dry kernel? His tongue tests the texture and taste. Is it soft and milky or is it hard with sharp edges? Does it have a disgustingly bitter green taste or does it have a deliciously ripe nutty flavor? Day by day the farmer will test the wheat. On the day when the head breaks easily in his hand and all of the chaff separates from the wheat, when he hears and feels the sharp crack as the kernel breaks between his teeth, and when his tongue both complains about the sharp edges and rejoices over the wonderful flavor, the farmer will wait no longer. That very day the farmer will send the harvesters into his field to gather the wheat before it is lost.

In Bible times, wheat was harvested by first picking the heads, then bringing them to a central location for threshing, and finally the wheat was separated from the chaff by winnowing. A good deal of automation had already occurred by my grandfather's time. He used a binder to cut the wheat and bundle it into sheaves. A wagon was drawn beside the binder to catch the sheaves and take them to a central location where a steam engine powered a threshing machine that extracted the wheat from the sheaves. The wheat came out one side of the threshing machine and was caught in the bed of a wagon to be hauled away for storage. The chaff came out of the other side and blew downwind into a large pile of straw. When the threshing was finished, the threshing machine would move on to a new location and the worthless pile of straw would be burned. Our modern combines perform the functions of both the binder and the threshing machine. The sickle cuts the wheat and the header feeds it into the thresher. The thresher breaks the heads. Its convex must be adjusted just right. Too little convex and the head is not fully broken. Too much and not only the head, but also the wheat kernels are cracked. From the thresher the wheat falls into the screens. A large fan blows across the screens sending the chaff out the back of the combine while the screens funnel the wheat to the elevator that lifts it up and drops it into the hopper. From the hopper the wheat is augured to a truck for transport to storage. If the farmer wants to keep the straw, it is allowed to drop into a windrow for baling. If he doesn't want the straw, the combine will scatter it over the field where it will become mulch and fertilizer for the next crop.

Now the farmer must know the difference between the wheat and the chaff. Can you imagine a farmer who kept the chaff and discarded the wheat? He and his family would soon starve. A wise farmer doesn't curse the chaff either; he knows that it is an integral part of the growing and maturing wheat plant. He knows that it has an important job to do. It's the natural package his wheat comes in. The chaff is not separated from the wheat until the harvest comes and only after the harvest is the chaff discarded. So if we want some wheat, then we'll just have to grow some chaff!

We are friends with a couple who are doing a pioneering work that deals with the relationship of Christians and the civil government. They don't head a large organization and it's not a theoretical pursuit for them. They are living out their research personally as the Lord leads them and as they learn more through the trials and errors of their experience. Usually it's the trials and errors of their experience that drives them to study these issues and seek God for His answers. They are so consumed with their mission that it's all they want to talk about. Sooner or later (and usually it's sooner) in every conversation or meeting they are in, they are compelled to share their all-consuming passion. Although they've learned a lot already, their understanding is still immature. There is still a lot more chaff visible than wheat. It's easy to see. It doesn't take any special discernment at all. Most people have only one encounter with our friends, see all that chaff, and want to relegate them to the unquenchable fire. Very few will even listen long enough to find out what they're really talking about, but I see the wheat that's growing. I believe they are blazing a trail that I may all too soon be forced to follow. If that's true, then they're making mistakes that they will be able to help me avoid. If they didn't have such passion, then they would never take the risk to brave the trials of the uncharted territory they're exploring. If they survive and return, then they will be able to lead many of us to safety in the days ahead. They've asked me from time to time to critique their work. That would be easy. It would be like throwing a ball in a closet and trying to hit a wall. However, I'm afraid to do it. Although they don't know it now, their work is still at a very immature state. Trying to separate any of the chaff from the plant at this point could kill it. I don't want to be a stumbling block in the road the Lord has given my friends to follow. I'll watch them, pray for them, and support them while they mature and produce the fruit of the labor the Lord has assigned them. They may not make it, they may not survive, they may stumble and fall, and they may produce bad fruit. If they do, then I hope I can be one of the Lord's instruments to help them get back up and start over again. I'll wait until their full maturity comes before I'll test their fruit. That will be soon enough to harvest the wheat and discard the chaff.

*When a farmer sees chaff he isn't undone
He knows it's the package his wheat comes from.
If we want a harvest of wheat that will last
We better start now growing some chaff!*