

## SOME SEED

In Jesus' attempt to communicate with us about spiritual matters, He ends up endowing all sorts of very familiar, ordinary things with extraordinary meanings. *Sheep* and *shepherds* ... *rocks* and *lilies* ... *vines* and *wine* ... even *bread* and *water* have all taken on incredible levels of significance. Everything takes on freshness and new dimensions and meaning – in Christ's presence.

So it is with the *seed*. Already a natural marvel and key to many life-support systems, the seed in Jesus' stories and illustrations becomes a symbol for the life force of the Kingdom of Heaven itself. Who could fathom the power of faith as Jesus means it – as He tries to explain to us – as a seed, a mustard seed? Or, to get onto our own theme for the day: What an incredible word-picture this is, this portrait of a world in which the seed of God's Word – God's truth and love and purpose, the very design of what God is bringing into being – is being spread everywhere; is falling upon the world in all places at all times; is seeking a place to take hold, a place to be welcomed and nurtured, a place where it can take root, grow, and bring forth LIFE as God intends it to be.

We are far removed from the land by now. It is not clear to us, as it was to Jesus' listeners, that seed must be sown, and that if it did not take root and produce a crop, there would be death and starvation for the whole community. We know, but it is not clear to us, like it was to Jesus' listeners, that the seed falling on good ground and bringing forth thirty to a hundredfold was not just a pleasantry. That was food! That was survival. The seed must produce enough new seed for the next sowing. Anything beyond that, you could eat. Beyond that, you could sell it for others to eat, and you could use the proceeds for a plow, some repairs, or whatever. (After you tithed, of course.)

It takes us hours to think and imagine our way back into all the subtle and obvious symbol meanings of a simple phrase like, "A sower went out to sow." Of course he did! And some of the simple, profound power of the story is muted for us because we have not been out sowing lately. Or rather, we do not think in those terms regarding the ways we *have* been out sowing lately.

I remember the craze for mustard-seed jewelry back in the late fifties. There were pendants, earrings, tie clasps, desk sets, charms, and all sorts of knick-knacks made from a mustard seed embedded in a globule of clear plastic. It was to remind everyone to have faith the size of a grain of mustard seed. Sometimes symbols get away from us and carry meaning we never intended. Any farmer could have told us that seeds do not do well embedded in plastic. More prophetically than we knew, we symbolized a generation that had isolated its faith into a sterile, inert showpiece. We did not let it out into the real atmosphere or put it into real ground where it could grow or affect anything. It was just to look at.

Even that, maybe, was better than the symbolic experience of a person who received a greeting card with some mustard seed enclosed. The card urged the receiver to plant the seed and let their faith grow as the mustard plant grew. I suppose hundreds of people received such cards and maybe were encouraged and inspired by the message. However, one unfortunate person actually planted the seeds as instructed and was rewarded with several fine tomatoes. Now, I like tomatoes. But for some things there is no substitute, and faith is one of them. Some of us have spent a lot of time and life trying to get along with substitutes for faith: optimism, positive thinking, self-confidence, bravado, and countless others. Growing tomatoes may be no disaster, but the shifted symbolism is much too accurate for comfort.

So we can ruin the symbols, but let's try not to. The seed stands for the dynamism of God's Kingdom ready to break forth – full of enormous power and potential, and full of the very essence of the Life principle – yet carried and scattered very conveniently in seed form, looking for a place to settle in and grow.

We are not the seed – we are the soil. It is very hard for most of us to keep that straight. Our minds have a tendency to change the symbolism right before our very eyes. Soon we are thinking and talking as if *we* fall on thorny ground, or *we* get carried away by the birds, or *we* are the rich harvest (or are supposed to be).

We are not the seed – we are the soil. Maybe we could try to remember that as the first point for today. We are the hard-packed path, or we are the rocky ground, or we are full of thorns, or we are good ground. The seed does not come from us. We do not control the seed, and we are not responsible for its presence. The parable is about how we *receive* the seed – about what happens to the seed when it lands on us.

Some soil is hard-packed. There is no penetration, so the birds get the seed. The schedule is too tight; the opinions are too set; life is already spoken for, already used up – there is no room for God’s seed. It’s interesting that this is the only kind of soil Jesus links with Satan. It offends some people to have birds linked with Satan. Birds are nice. Birds sing. Birds are pretty. Birds should be protected. Well, Jesus liked birds too, in other contexts. But be fair: This is about sowing and seeds. Have you ever planted a row of corn and had the crows undo all your labor, over and over? It is one of the original scenarios of total frustration. Birds that like seeds are no joke to a farmer. If you sow your crop and pay no attention to the birds, you will starve. And how like Satan to steal the seed, the kernel, the life force. We think all is going along well – the sun shines, the rains come, the land is full of promise – but then, with a sickening feeling, we begin to realize that no grain is coming up or there is only a little in scattered patches. And by now, the season is so late, maybe even too late. Disaster! *That’s satanic.*

The rocky ground seems to represent people who are fear-oriented. Unlike those in the first category, who think they have no needs, boy does the rocky ground have needs! “How would *you* feel if you had to have all these rocks I carry in *your* field?” So rocky-ground people are instantly delighted by the falling seed, like they are always delighted by every new quick cure or easy answer that comes along. But the soil is shallow: the enthusiasm for the new truth is quickly overcome, first by all the old problems returning, and then by the next new fad or “teacher” coming along. Rocky soil does not like the cost of commitment, at any level. It would rather focus on the problems or the pain.

Thorns represent the cares and worries of physical survival that crowd out the growth of the seed: money, position, popularity. Everyone seems to understand this one easily, quickly, and clearly. Maybe it’s because we do not want anybody to feel they have to go on talking about this one for very long. “Thank you very much, yes, this one is quite clear to me. (So shut up about it.)”

The point and purpose of the parable is the good soil, of course. The other kinds of soil are only mentioned to highlight the good soil by contrast. Fascinated with thorns and rocks and birds, we sometimes forget the good soil. What is it like?

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Good soil is full of nutrients, easily watered, relatively level, cultivated, plowed, and ready to receive the seed. That is a whole new sermon! We need to get a real farmer in here to tell us all the analogies of good soil that would have been obvious to Jesus' listeners. Sometimes we forget that at one time the whole civilization lived pretty close to the land. In any case, good soil is ready to receive the seed. It is freshly plowed (which it may or may not have considered to be a harrowing experience). Above all, it is not otherwise occupied. It is ready and waiting for the seed, having nothing better to do.

To reiterate: It is not hard like the path, but freshly turned. It is not full of rocks – that is, it may go through harrowing experiences and know the testing, but it is not concentrated on the negative. It does not live focused on the problems, nor is it frightened by whatever disciplines or challenges may lie ahead. And it is not full of thorns. It needs sun and rain and food like everything else, but it is not hung up on the symbols or realities of such “possessions.”

Soil is no good if it is used up, but it is also no good if otherwise occupied. It is one of Jesus' most frequent points, and most frequently missed. Indeed, it seems rather unjust to us. What if a good field is busy bearing another crop when the seed of God's Word falls? We come up with all sorts of justifications, and we honestly think that God would not want us to be just sitting around.

But Jesus constantly offers a different perspective: Why are we fooling around with crops God did not sow in the first place? And if we are and the Word of God comes to us, then we must instantly drop whatever other crops we are working on (no matter how good) or miss the real reason for our being – and for our being *here*.

How do we get to be receptive soil? By knowing ourselves, knowing our need of God, knowing we have nothing better to do than wait and watch in order to serve when we are called. Maybe most of all, we are receptive soil when we simply remember that we are not the seed – we are the soil.

If God's seed is growing in us, we will see lots of seed being sown. And indeed we will feel part of it, as we watch it at work in so many places in and around us. But that is dangerous too, if we start to think we are now the sower – if we start to get into the center of things and try to push it, control it, make it happen, take credit for it. We are not the seed *or* the sower – we are the soil. When we consciously step into the sower's role, we only end up throwing dirt.

*A sower went out to sow.* Indeed, yes! You have felt the seed falling on your soil for as long as you have been alive. Something at the core, some partly conscious inner “self,” keeps wanting to respond to the urge to care, to love, to be “good,” to seek truth, to do justice. We are plagued from the beginning with a hunger to be open, to share, to know and be known, to be forgiving and to accept forgiveness. Nobody “taught us” all that. We *long* to be whole, to strive for excellence, to live “clean” and what we sometimes call “childlike.” Oh, to be rid of all the lies and games and power plays! To leave behind the cruelty and fear and all the divisions – all the residue of resentments, animosities, and deep-burning angers.

Yes, we long with a great yearning to come out into the light and joy of LIFE. But who can believe it is truly possible in our world, except in special moments with very special people? And even those moments are tenuous and fragile. Has it not always been so? Every marriage we make, every partnership we form, every friendship that grows awakens the hope. Yet so often in our world the hope is partial or backfires entirely, until we are tempted to close out the hope for good and stop responding to it. We cannot stop the yearning, but we can stop responding – stop putting ourselves in such a vulnerable position.

Why should the soil keep receiving the seed when we know there is fire; when sometimes others steal the harvest; when enemies keep sowing weeds; when there is blight, hail, drought, storm, and gophers? Yet somehow, despite it all – all over the world for a million years – good soil has been bringing forth the harvest. Not always well. Not every year. Never perfectly. But nevertheless!

The sower still goes out to sow. The seed is incredible, full of Life and power and potential beyond our dreams. And we feel the seed falling around us and on us, begging to be claimed and nourished and grown. Has it not always been so? We have known and felt the seed from our earliest memories. There has always been a great urge to live for the seed, instead of for the birds or the rocks or the thorns. That great possibility dogs our steps, nibbling at the edge of our consciousness, all of our days.

How gently the sower sows. No week goes by without our having to shake it off to get back to “real” life. No day goes by without our having to make choices against such ideals in order to do what we

think of as “survival.” And often the seed does take root and we rejoice to feel it growing. Looking back, those are the only times and experiences that really matter.

Likewise, we never get angry or hurt or discouraged or depressed but what some inner voice calls us to turn away from it, to come out of it, to rise above it. How we fight, thrash about, and argue within ourselves to pretend that we do not hear the inner urging – that we do not know anything about any seed. And we tell ourselves we cannot afford to trust these urgings that are too soft, too beautiful, too unrealistic, too unnatural, too spiritual.

*A sower went out to sow ... patiently, unceasingly. Every waking day of our lives, the seeds of God’s Word fall gently, quietly ... seeking our receptivity; trying to find some response, some nurture; hoping to find a place in us to take root and grow.*

Only that which comes from these seeds brings any real or lasting joy, gives our lives any true meaning or purpose, makes our experience in this life worth any of the striving. So Jesus asks: How are you doing? What kind of soil are you, right now? Are you learning to trust the seed that keeps falling? Are you learning to relax in the knowledge that it is not up to you and that it will keep falling? Do you love it and let it grow in you, no matter how much your natural fears may warn you against it?

*A sower went out to sow. We are not the sower. We are not the seed. We are the soil. It is our proper, rightful, “easy,” delightful function to let the seed grow within us. That is what we are designed for. It takes tremendous effort to harden ourselves against it, to reject the seed, to turn away, to stay alone, to be busy with other things, to make the choices that keep us in control. That is why we feel so heroic and courageous and tired and tragic so much of the time. It is anguish for the soil to reject the seed. It requires enormous energy and contortion and stress for the soil to keep pretending that it is the seed or the sower.*