

## THE SOWER, THE SEEDS, AND THE SOIL (Mk. 4:3-9)

In our previous study we looked at the background and setting for what Jesus was about to teach the people. The stage is now set ... and the people are prepared. It is important what Jesus is about to say, so He impressed upon them, **Hearken**, Listen, Ἀκούετε. It is amazing how they could be in the presence of a great speaker and yet, their attention could soon wander off. Imagine being on the shore of the Sea of Galilee that day, surrounded by all those people and the beautiful scenery ... Yes, of course they would be listening to Him intently, especially at the beginning ... but we all know how easy it is for our thoughts to stray. So, Jesus, - knowing what they were like, - instructed them, **Hearken**, Listen. In fact, He repeated the word ten times in v.3,9,12,15,16,18,20,23,24,33 ...! He had something to say ... and He came to them to say it, so they needed to be listening! And to emphasise what He was about to say, He further added, **Behold**, (ἰδοὺ).

He drew their attention to a most familiar scene, the sower who went out to sow. They were all country folk, and they would have known how the sower began by digging rows of earth, - ploughing them carefully with his animals. And then he would walk up and down, with a bag over his shoulder, and he would be spreading the seed methodically among the rows. ... Jesus was 'speaking the people's language'! They all knew exactly what He was referring to. There would have been no point Him saying anything if they didn't know what He was talking about!

How tremendously important that is! I'm very aware that how we study a passage of Scripture must be simple and down-to-earth. We are not in a lecture room ... and forgive me sometimes if I don't keep it as straightforward as I ought because Jesus took great truths and He made every effort to tell them to His hearers using very simple and ordinary language. ... On the other hand, though, no matter how simple a speaker manages to make it, the responsibility of the hearer is to **Hearken**, Listen, and to concentrate. ... When the birds would have been chirping in the trees, and the sheep bleating out in the fields, and a fish jumping every now and again out of the water ... the crowds had to hold their full attention on Jesus.

It is so easy to allow our thoughts to stray and in next-to-no-time we are away out in a world that is totally disconnected with what we are supposed to be listening to. ... And so Jesus began with one of the most ordinary of illustrations to present such important truth. He told them of the sower who went to sow ...

That is what sowers do, and you wouldn't expect them to be doing anything else. In the same way, you wouldn't expect anyone who preaches to be preaching from anything other than the Word of God ... Behold, there went out a sower to sow ... And then Jesus recounted the main part of the story, <sup>4</sup> And it came to pass, as he sowed, some fell by the way side, and the fowls of the air came and devoured it up. <sup>5</sup> And some fell on stony ground, where it had not much earth; and immediately it sprang up, because it had no depth of earth: <sup>6</sup> But when the sun was up, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away. <sup>7</sup> And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up, and choked it, and it yielded no fruit. <sup>8</sup> And other fell on good ground, and did yield fruit that sprang up and increased; and brought forth, some thirty, and some sixty, and some an hundred.

That was it! No fancy words. No technical terms. No trying to impress, as the Pharisees would have done. Jesus simply told a story they would all have understood. They could look over into the fields and see the paths hardened by the travellers as they walked along. Any seed falling *there* might as well fall on concrete! The birds would come along and have a feast!

Some seed also fell on rocky ground ... There was just about enough soil for seed to develop the skimpiest root but because it had no real depth of soil, - coupled with the scorching sun that, - the plant growing out of the seed would quickly shrivel, wither and die.

This was the type of ground that would have been familiar to these people listening to Jesus. What we are talking about here is the field in many parts of Israel where there would be a couple of inches of soil on top of limestone rock. It was hopeless to plough the ground for it was so impenetrable! ... What actually happened was the seed enters and finds the soft soil, it then gets life, the ground is warm, there is moisture and water and the seeds start to grow but the roots cannot get a firm grip in the soil and they don't receive the proper nutrients they require for growth. Hence, after a while, the plant shoots upwards, <sup>v.5</sup> it sprang up, because it had no depth of earth.

The third kind of soil is one that many of us can relate to. You prepare the garden and you hope you have taken out most of the weeds ... most of them, or as many as you can see! You know what it is like ... You clear all the weeds away, but when you go back and look again, you see more of them! It doesn't seem to matter how often you check ... they seem to defiantly 'poke' out when you turn your back! It's so easy to get scundered with them!

Anyhow, the seed falls into this type of ground and it looks good ... ‘not too bad’ ... but down in the soil are those little ‘rogue’ weeds lurking that inevitably start to grow up alongside the seedlings you have planted, and the roots entangle them ... Maybe you have pulled the top of the dandelion off, but the root is still there! ... Good seed and weeds compete, and it is weeds that end up winning for they restrict the good seed, they drink its moisture, they cover its sunlight, and the good seed cannot survive.

And the fourth type of soil Jesus spoke about was good, rich, deep, clean soil, - ... with no stones, no creepers, and no weeds ... The type of soil that would welcome the roots and produce the very best!

So, the story was very easy to understand. It was all fairly basic. Jesus hadn’t said anything any of them didn’t know already. Even the fishermen with Him in the boat could relate to the sower sowing seeds in the soil! ... But so what?! What is the point of the story? What was Jesus *really* saying? ... After having finished the parable He emphasised to them, <sup>9</sup> *He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.* ... Well, of course, presumably (!) they all had ears, - *literally*, - ... but how many of them were actually listening and taking in what He was saying?! ... It is something *we* need to consider also ... When the Lord speaks through His Word, are *we* listening? Is our mind focussing on what He is saying?

And there is something else ... Sadly, not all who listen understand. It’s not that they are stupid, but it is because this type of listener genuinely struggles to come to grips with what the truth of God’s Word is saying. And sometimes, no matter how simply these truths are being presented, not everyone *can* grasp what they are about. It is as if there is a wall keeping out the light! ... And then we must be careful because in trying to use various means to make what we are saying clearer, there is a ‘line *we* must not cross’ lest *we* end up ‘chipping away’ so much that we tamper with God’s Word. ... What Jesus did here was the best approach, - He used a familiar story, but He also was aware that not all who were listening would take in what He was saying.

If He was in a classroom, He would have spoken on the children’s level, and given sufficient time for them to grasp what He was saying. Similarly, if He was speaking to teenagers, He would have spoken in terms they would have understood, but, - and remember, His time was restricted, - He was speaking to crowds consisting of all types of people with various interests, intellects, abilities, etc, - ... and it is not always possible for everyone to understand ... and that was what Jesus meant, <sup>9</sup> *He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.*

There is also another aspect, and it relates particularly to His own Jewish people, **Jn. 1:11** He came unto his own, and his own received him not. ... Why? ... Why did God's beloved people of Israel refuse to receive His Son? John gives us the answer, **Jn. 12:37** But though he [*Jesus*] had done so many miracles before them, yet they believed not on him: **38** That the saying of Esaias the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spake, Lord, who hath believed our report? and to whom hath the arm of the Lord been revealed? **39** Therefore they could not believe, because that Esaias said again, **40** He hath blinded their eyes, and hardened their heart; that they should not see with *their* eyes, nor understand with *their* heart, and be converted, and I should heal them. ... God had blinded their eyes! Yes, II Cor. 4:4 says, the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them. ... Paul sarcastically refers to the devil's promotion of himself to the title of 'god of this world' ... but the *real* and *true* God of this world has never stopped being the God Who created it! ... And the God Who created it has never relinquished His authority. So therefore, it is God Who has, - for a time and for His purposes, - **Jn. 12:40** ... blinded their eyes, and hardened their heart; that they should not see with *their* eyes, nor understand with *their* heart, and be converted.

That blindness and hardness will one day be removed so that *all* Israel will come to recognise Jesus as their Saviour, Messiah and Lord ... but here, on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, many of the people from that region were not *hearing* what Jesus was saying. His truth was not entering their hearts.

It is a fact of life that the Gospel does not penetrate every heart, just as this parable describes. We see it in our communities, and we see it in our families. Thousands in Kirkcaldy have been taught in Sunday Schools the Gospel and yet thousands have never *really* heard it, and understood it, and accepted it. When it comes to the opportunities we have at Christmas, Easter, funerals, etc we present the Gospel and going out past us they give us warm words of commendation ... but the truth is they did not understand what we were saying for if they truly did they would believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved.

The good news is that in Mark chapter four the Saviour had not finished with the people yet for He would make His way down to Jerusalem where He would be arrested and sentenced to die on a cross ... He died on that cross to save His people from their sins, and His death achieved everything His Father in Heaven purposed in eternity for it pleased the LORD to bruise him ... [*so that*]he shall see *his* seed, he shall prolong *his* days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand (Is. 53:10)

As Jesus sat in that boat, just a few feet away from the water's edge, He 'knew the next chapter in the book', for He had written it. He knew that every one of God's purposes would be fulfilled. ... You pray for your loved ones. Some of them made professions of faith when they were younger, but they don't seem to have gone on with the Lord ... Keep praying, and keep trusting in Him to bring them back. Just like these people in Galilee, there is not much 'head-way' being made ... and yet Jesus presented to them the Gospel. ... It is the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ alone that **Rom. 1:16** is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth ... **17** For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith.

Yes, sometimes the seed of the Gospel falls on a surface it will not penetrate ... Sometimes, it will fall on a surface that seemingly allows a measure of growth, but then it withers ... Sometimes it falls among weeds that entangles it. In the sovereign will and plan of God, though, it also falls upon the good ground that has been prepared by the Holy Spirit and where growth is guaranteed and fruit assured, for *by their fruits ye shall know them* (Mt. 7:16).

And there's something else we know from our own experience ... When we moved to where we are living now our back garden was so muddy that the rain had formed three ponds. When we went out to look ... just underneath the soil there were large stones and pieces of pipe. Nothing could have grown! ... You could have sowed bucketloads of seed but you would have been wasting your time, effort, and money. What we had to do was lay pipes and divert the water away. Then we had to get good top soil, and a special type of grit to allow the soil to breathe, and other nutrients. Then we had to turn the whole garden over about half-a-dozen times. ... It was hard work ... but do you know what ...? The flowers and the plants and the grass are growing ...

Here is my point ... In the will of God, the Holy Spirit can make the hardest ground supple enough to receive the seed of the Gospel and to germinate and to grow. In the will of God, the Holy Spirit can soften and tend to the soil. He can remove the weeds, - no matter how far into the ground they go, - and He brings the good seeds to their full growth. He keeps away 'the birds' that would threaten to come and eat the seeds. He shades the young plant from the heat of the sun, and from the heavy rains ... Our God is a wonderful Saviour, and there is no obstacle to man's salvation He cannot deal with.

In the garden beside the tomb in which Jesus was laid, Mary Magdalene came (Jn. 20:11-16) ... and when she saw the tomb was empty she wept. She thought someone had come and taken away His body. She met the Man in the garden Who she thought was the gardener ... It was the risen Jesus. ...

Then we turn back to Gen. 2:8, *And the LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden.* ... Our God *is* the Gardener. Long before man was created, God had planted the garden. He had arranged all the flowers, the plants, the trees, the fountains ... He is the Master-Gardener. The psalmist declared, **Ps. 92:13** *Those that be planted in the house of the LORD shall flourish in the courts of our God. 14 They shall still bring forth fruit in old age; they shall be fat and flourishing ... 104:16 The trees of the LORD are full of sap; the cedars of Lebanon, which he hath planted. He is the Saviour, and He alone makes all the preparations necessary for precious sinners to be saved and kept ... they Is. 35:2 shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice even with joy and singing.*

And in the final book of the Bible we also read about the Garden He has planted in the new heaven and the new earth, **Rev. 22:1** *on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month.* The One Who sows the seed is God Himself, and the seed He sows is His own life-giving and life-changing Word.

Pray, and keep on praying then, for the application of the Word as it goes out ... that it will fall on the good ground prepared of the Lord. And concerning ourselves, that we would hear what it is He is saying directly to each of us. Amen.