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GOOD NEWS *Unlimited*

SEED and SOIL

By Bruce Burgess

On another occasion Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge. He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: "Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, multiplying thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times."

Then Jesus said, "he who has an ear, let him hear." When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that,

'they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!'

Then Jesus said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? The farmer sows the word. Some people are like seed along the path where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. Still others, like seed sown among thorns hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown" (Mark 4:1-20).

One of the things that always startled me about Jesus' public ministry is the action of the Holy Spirit, right after Jesus' baptism. When Jesus was baptized, he came up out of the water the Spirit of God descended like a dove and alighted him. Then the voice of God is heard declaring, "This is my Son, whom I love, with him I am well pleased."

These moments surrounding Jesus' baptism are quite

momentous, but notice what happens next: "Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." That doesn't seem to be a particularly nice thing to do! That seems a strange action to take before Jesus even gets started with his ministry. The actions of the Holy Spirit seemed a bit unusual to say the least. Perhaps those actions were both necessary and loving.

I would suggest that before Jesus begins his ministry he needs to understand something of the opposition he will face throughout his ministry. It would be less than loving not to prepare Jesus for what he would face. It's like what can happen today when people are encouraged to become followers of Jesus, and sometimes they are told that life will be totally different (which is partly true), and that they will find a new sense of joy (which is partly true), and their life will be full of meaning and purpose (also partly true). To their possible detriment, little, if any, mention is made of the reality that in addition, they will experience struggle, pain, persecution, and grief. I think there is a reluctance to tell the whole story to a potential or brand new Christian for fear that it will seem too challenging, and might actually dissuade someone from 'signing up.'

When we do that, we do a grave disservice to the one making the commitment. That is part of the focus in this parable of Jesus. It is placed in the context of sowing the seed. Faith is sowed. It is cast, like seed, with the hope that it will take root and flourish. Notice that the one who sows the seed has very little control over what happens to it. The seed is cast upon the earth then plowed into the ground. Some of it never germinates. It never gets under the surface, so the birds come and gobble it up. Some seeds do germinate and spring up quickly, but the soil is thin and cannot accommodate further growth. Indeed the plant withers in the sun through lack of deep enough roots. Other seed is choked out by thorns and is unable to produce grain. Finally, some lands in just the right spot and grows to produce a significant crop.

Part of what this parable tells us is that the Christian faith is a journey which comes with complications, hardship and opposition, as well as joy, growth and the production of fruit. Notice when Jesus interprets the parable to his dim-witted disciples, he introduces a new character into the story—Satan. This takes us back to the beginning of Jesus' ministry when he was tempted by Satan in the wilderness—right after going

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EDITORIAL . . .



Pastor Ron Allen

“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow is the road that leads to life, and only a few find it” (Matthew 7:13, 14).

Older Bible versions have: ‘strait’ is the gate. That is not a word that sees much use these days. But it bears a meaning which is somewhat obscured in the word, ‘narrow.’ An echo of its meaning may yet be detected in the expression, ‘dire straits.’ A person in dire straits is someone who is enduring difficulty. To be ‘straitened’ is to be compressed by trouble, to be in ‘tight place.’

On the narrow road freedom is restricted; choices are confined; you cannot do anything that pleases. One of the things that can separate living things from inanimate ones is their ability to create order out of chaos by resisting the easy option. A rock weathers away in the wind, sun and rain, but bees, by sheer volume of disciplined effort, produce highly organized societies that yield a wonderful side benefit of honey for humans to enjoy.

The wide road is traveled by creatures who seek only to obey the law of least resistance. This road is the chosen course of many human beings. To ‘run with the pack’ or ‘go with the flow’ has its appeal. The secret for life at its best lies not with the majority. Unmeasured repose which never denies gratification or a regulated use of resources and energy usually does little to sustain or initiate life.

Most people would have some idea of Jesus’ meaning when he speaks of the two roads. Further, most would recognize their natural affinity for the broad one. I happen to know that I am a sack-full of appetites that clamor for indulgence. I know that Jesus speaks to me. I understand Oscar Wilde who famously quipped that he “could withstand everything except temptation.” In my soberest moments I know that to the degree that I practice self-limitation, to the degree I choose to go without or to suffer a level of privation and make some

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public, so-to-speak. Jesus describes to us the distressing reality that there are forces at work in the world which are not compatible with the growth of God’s kingdom. Simply put, the forces of good and evil are at war. We see the evidence of the dichotomy between love and hate, between hope and despair, violence and peace. Satan opposes God’s plan at every turn. And God’s plan is to redeem the cosmos by making love the primary active force at work in the world.

When we faithfully seek to bear witness to the truth of God’s love and grace in Christ, Satan actively opposes that and

personal sacrifice, to that same degree do I begin to live and to be life-giving.

Jesus’ teaching about the narrow road expresses a principle that does not suffer for lack of illustration in the world, but there is a further way of understanding it, and this is its best part. The narrow, not-so-easy road that leads to life is seen ultimately, in Jesus himself. Access to the Life of God is to be had through one person. He that has the Son has life. The road that leads to life take its character from Jesus’ own experience.

The nearer Jesus drew to his cross, the less company he had. While ever he was seen as a mere miracle-worker, someone to heal sickness and feed the starving; a man to smooth out life’s rough patches, people flocked to him. When they saw that he intended to stick narrowly to his policy of compassion for the unwanted and rejected, people lost interest in him.

Whenever the religion of Jesus has been presented as a costless, accommodating boulevard of dreams come true, it has lost its life-giving power. Wherever Christianity is seen as a philosophy to make life easy, it is mediocre. The fastest growing Christian communities in the world today are in places like China, India and other places where it costs a great deal to follow Jesus.

Do not look for that which is easy to believe in. Look for that which is great to believe. *Be merciful, even as your father in heaven is merciful; love one another as I have loved you; Love your enemies; Forgive—seventy times seven.* Are any of these ideals easy? Are any simple? No, not at all. The central values of the Christian faith are shockingly high, impossibly demanding. If ever there was a narrow road, this is it. On this road we are invited into the service of the most taxing ideals, the most exacting principles. Narrow road indeed! Yet, it is a royal road; the most joyous and rewarding of pathways.

often succeeds in negating our actions. That is done to discourage us, to try to manipulate us into giving up. When we have done our best to make a difference—and see that it is not working as well as we wished—we are tempted to conclude that it’s just a losing cause; so what is the point of trying?

One of the best examples of resisting that particular temptation can be seen in stories from the mission field. Sometimes it took years, even generations before there was a response. Sometimes Satan’s hold is so strong that it takes a very long time to break down the barriers so that faith can finally begin to grow and then blossom. We need to resist that →

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temptation and continue to sow the seeds of God's love in Christ; recognizing that some seed will not sprout. Our job is not to calculate how successful our efforts should be (demanding some proportionate response to our efforts), but to be faithful and trust God with the results.

Then there are those who receive the word with joy and are excited about their faith. They feel invincible. They are cranked up and can't do enough in their desire to see this good news that has so changed them, touch the lives of others. They are growing in their faith in leaps and bounds. Often they are very much unprepared for any kind of active disappointment, or some personal crisis that may come along. This is why Jesus says: "*When trouble or persecution comes, they quickly fall away.*"

There are two important implications here. First, notice Jesus doesn't say IF trouble or persecution comes, but WHEN. So this is an expected part of the faith journey; an inevitable part if we are truly following. Hence we should not be surprised when this happens, or feel that it is somehow unfair. Second, we need to help each other in our faith journey; help to prepare people to resist. It may not be the kind of thing a new Christian wants to hear. Especially since at the early stage of faith it is all sweetness and light, and they can't imagine anything that would knock them off the track. We need to help one another when troubles or persecutions come.

You see Jesus is teaching his disciples about what they soon will face. It isn't a teaching about how evil and sin work in the world in some generalized way which doesn't touch them personally. He is telling them of what will happen to them when events transpire to undo them. We know that, before the resurrection, the disciples would indeed fall away and thus fulfill much of what Jesus talks about in this parable. So will we. We will experience trouble; things will not go our way. We will lose a job, fail in a relationship, hurt someone we love or be hurt by someone we love, be struck down by an illness or a limitation. These things will occur, and Satan will try to use them against us by tempting us to blame God, to embrace despair or to give up. If we don't understand these tactics and actively resist them, we can be undone by them.

Jesus also talks about the temptations of wealth, the desires of the world, and our own worries that can choke our faith and turn it into something negative. When we pay too much attention to wealth and the pursuit of possessions our faith will indeed be choked off. We will start to seek security in worldly things and lose our dependence upon God. We will not necessarily lose our faith—though that is a danger—but we will lose the power and the efficacy of faith. We will be limited and stunted in our growth. We will become embittered and see all that is negative around us.

Anxieties and temptations are not things that can be banished forever with one prayer request. We must pray every day asking God to help us to be content with what we have, and resist the temptation to define our worth by our possession or achievements. We must ask God to remind us how deeply we have been blessed and how deep God's love for us truly is. We need to pray for the grace to be thankful and full of praise,

so that the light of gratitude can dispel the darkness of opposition.

Part of what this parable is telling us is that there are stages to the Christian journey. There are seasons when our faith is perhaps stronger or weaker. I think we assume that we should be able to get to the place where we continually and consistently bear fruit at the rate of 30 or 60 or a hundred times what was sown. And that would be wonderful. But the reality is that faith is an inconsistent journey because we are not consistent. We may be at a place where our roots are sinking deeper, but something comes along and knocks us for a loop. Maybe we get a little complacent; let our spiritual disciplines slip backward.

Those forces are still active today. We are tempted to give up or opt out when things don't go our way. Temptation is a constant and is not reduced as we grow in faith. It will more likely increase, for as we grow in faith we pose a major threat. We can't make temptation lessen. All we can do is increase our capacity to resist it. It's like lawn. The best defense against weeds is a thick, healthy lawn.

The more we assume God owes us better, the more we subtly push God away, and buy into self-pity or a victim mentality; we start making unreasonable demands on to God, or even resort to threats. Before we know it, our faith is assailed and we don't know how to navigate our way out. It is and always will be God who helps the seed grow in us and in others.


Our task is to cultivate those seeds. As Paul pointed out: one plants, another waters, but God brings growth. We are called to do the watering for ourselves and others. If we do not actively attend to our spiritual health and engage regularly in spiritual disciplines, then we will hamper our capacity to do God's will. That may sound like bad news—all that effort, commitment and vigilance. But it is actually very good news.

We cannot change or escape the world as it is. It is a world where death is a reality; suffering and challenge are part of the package. It is a fallen world. If Jesus' word to us was simply: "In this world you will have trouble... suck it up", we might well be tempted to despair. But Jesus said:

"Take heart, for I have overcome the world."

God will help us grow individually, and as a faith community. He will bless our efforts to spread the message so that others will grow as well. When we accept the faith God gives us, and we place our trust in the love and grace of Christ, we will not only be equipped to weather any storm we might face, but our faithfulness will be honored by God in his own way and time. And we will be a compelling witness in our world.

It is easy to be complacent when things are going well. It is when things fall apart that people look for help. When people see that we handle opposition well; that we do not embrace despair but continue to trust and demonstrate joy, they will want what we have. If we want to multiply the kingdom and bear good fruit, let us listen, and respond, and place our trust in God.

-BRUCE BURGESS: Pastor, Immanuel Baptist Church, Toronto, Canada. Used by Permission. 



FEAR CAST OUT

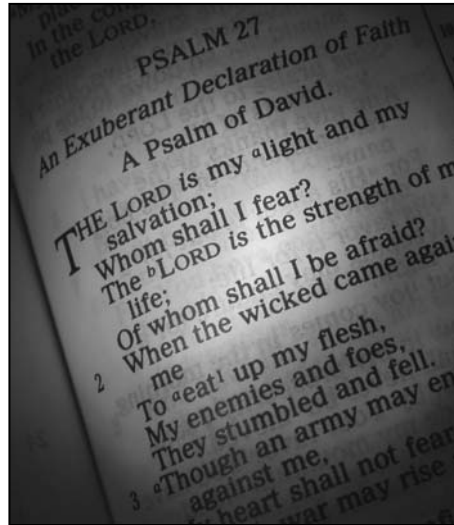
By Alan Walker

The Christian faith was born in the first century partly as an answer to fear. Anybody who knows anything of the ancient world recognizes that the ancient world was always afraid. The Bible is a book that grapples with fear. Jesus is presented as one who could cast out demons, who had dominance over devils, who brought deliverance to people caught in the bondage of fear.

In the later New Testament, the same theme is constantly repeated. In Paul, for example, you hear a phrase about Jesus being set *far above all principalities and powers in heavenly places*. This does not mean what we think it means. In Paul's day people believed there were seven layers of air between earth and the sky, and that in each of those seven layers particular species of demons lived that could suddenly plunge down, almost like modern dive-bombers, and bring destruction to people and to communities. So when Paul says Christ was placed high above principalities and powers, he is declaring that Jesus is dominant over the devils.

There is a revival of the occult in the Western World. Black magic is now not unknown. There are many people who do walk in fear of evil spirits. This of course can be expected. The alternative to religious faith is not irreligion or agnosticism, it is superstition. Therefore as faith declines in some lives, people are beginning again to be plagued by the fear of the unknown, to be haunted by evil spirits.

Peter Drucker has a powerful chapter in one of his books, which is headed: "The Return of The Demons." He is not talking about evil spirits as in New Testament times. He sees in the great impersonal forces of unemployment, of the sudden eruption of war, of the violence which stalks the earth, forces that are beyond rational control. People see them almost as demons, as dread forces which can destroy their lives.



Bernard Shaw says there is only one universal passion: it is fear . . . everyone of us knows what it is to be frightened, frightened of life and frightened of death.

Jesus liberates us from fear by showing us a good God whose love can be trusted. Some time ago I read the story of a woman who lived at the time of the Civil War when the North and South forces advanced and retreated around her home. Sometimes it passed under the control of the Northern army, sometimes of the Southern army. One day she rose from bed and was just getting her breakfast when she heard gunfire outside. Presently a group of soldiers came in—enemy soldiers to her, for she was of the North—and they demanded breakfast.

When the breakfast was ready, she turned to the enemy soldiers and said, "It is a custom of long standing in this home that we always have prayers before we eat our breakfast. I hope you will not mind if we have prayers today." She took down her Bible and she read Psalm 27: "*The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?*" The soldiers were quiet as she read, and then she bowed her head and began to pray. While her eyes were closed she heard some movement around the room. At the close of the prayer, she opened her eyes and found the soldiers were gone. The enemy had silently crept away.

I think that is a parable of what Jesus Christ does. If we believe that God is love, that the Lord is our light and our salvation, fear creeps away. Jesus—Savior from fear—comes to us and shows us that God is love, God is good, God can be trusted. In this faith we can live and conquer fear. "*There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.*"

-Alan Walker: JESUS THE LIBERATOR. pp. 14-18. 

"The best way to explain it is to do it," said the Dodo in 'Alice in Wonderland'. That is good theology, and the best religion. The best way to explain the existence of God is to do what he asks. The best way to explain love is to be loving. The best way to explain forgiveness is to be forgiving. The best way to explain eternal life is to live it. Isn't this Jesus' way of explaining the greatest truths? He did not prove the existence of God by logic; he showed us by living the life of a child of the father. He did not argue about the possibility of immortality; he lived the kind of life that is worth continuing, the kind of life that would make us glad to be immortal.

We are not here to argue for God; we are here to live for him. Any smart person can show up the flaws in our logic, but who can gainsay our glad and obedient life with Christ?

The best way to explain your faith in Christ is just to live it.

-George Arthur Frantz.

