

Sowing in a Time of Drought

Text: Gen. 26:12-14; Mark 4:1-20

Introduction:

1. If there is one prominent object associated with Isaac's life, it is the well. With Abraham it was the altar, with Isaac it was the well. This certainly fits the typological picture. Isaac's being offered on the altar of sacrifice is followed by Isaac digging wells and discovering "springing water" (Vs. 19). We know that "living water" is a picture of the ministry of the Holy Spirit (John 7:37) and the Holy Spirit was poured out following the cross.
2. In our last message we studied the theme of testing in the life of Isaac. Our outline was:
 - The Danger in the Time of Testing (Vs. 1-3a)
 - The Directive in the Time of Testing (Vs. 2b-5)
 - The Deceit in the Time of Testing (Vs. 6-11)
 - The Duty in the Time of Testing (Vs. 12-14)
3. In this message we will focus on Isaac's sowing and reaping during this time of famine and the lessons it has for sowing and reaping in the spiritual realm. We will consider this theme of sowing under three headings.

I. THE PRACTICE OF SOWING (VS. 12A)

A. The Conditions in which Isaac Sowed (Vs. 1)

1. The conditions were by no means favourable to sowing and reaping at this time. The situation was **dry** and **difficult**. To sow during a time of abundant rain with favourable soil conditions is one thing. To sow in a time of **drought** is quite another! The dire conditions could easily have discouraged Isaac from attempting to sow.
2. In the spiritual realm, we are living in dry and difficult times for the sowing of the Gospel seed in our nation. Spiritual drought is everywhere and from a human perspective the outlook is bleak for a harvest of souls. There are other sections of the harvest field that are more receptive to the Gospel seed at this time. **It is easy to get discouraged in the work of sowing by the difficulty of the conditions that confront us.** However, we should follow Isaac's example and sow irrespective of the conditions.

B. The Confidence with which Isaac Sowed (Vs. 2-5)

1. What was it that gave Isaac his confidence to sow? Undoubtedly his actions were undergirded by **the promises of God**. God had promised to bless him if he would stay in the land God had called him to and in the strength of that promise, Isaac sowed the seed.
2. Wherever God had called us to serve, we need to sow in faith, trusting the promises of God that in due season we "shall reap if we faint not" (Gal. 6:9). God instructed Isaac to **STAY** where He had put him and that he would know God's blessing there.
3. Christ is the Lord of the harvest and He determines which field we are to labour in for Him. God's will is for the Gospel to be preached

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to “every creature” so God places His sowers in difficult as well as more favourable areas.

4. It is likely that the drought conditions were not as severe in Gerar due to the fact it was closer to the coast and therefore would have a higher rainfall. But ultimately, Isaac’s success was due to God’s blessing. Evidently his crops did much better than the Philistines otherwise they would not have envied him so much (Vs. 14b).
5. This is the first reference in the Bible to seed sowing. Significantly, the first reference to sowing the seed in the New Testament is found in Christ’s parable of the seed, the sower and the soils (Matt. 13, Mk. 4, Lk. 8). The good ground in Christ’s parable also yielded “an hundredfold” (Vs. 8) We will do an overview of this parable under the next heading.

II. THE PARABLE CONCERNING SOWING (MK. 4:1-20)

The word ‘parable’ means “something thrown alongside of” so it has the basic meaning of a comparison or analogy. Christ told simple stories based on the experiences of his listeners to illustrate Divine truth.

Someone stated that a parable was like a doorway. “Jesus’ listeners stood at the doorway and heard Him. If they were not interested, they stayed on the outside. But if they were interested, they could walk through the doorway, and think more about the truth behind the parable and what it meant to their life.” A parable was intended on the one hand to reveal truth to the receptive and at the same time conceal truth from the rebellious (Vs. 11-12).

A. The Pictures of the Parable (Vs. 13-14)

1. The sower – represents Christ at that time when he was proclaiming the Gospel of the kingdom and all believers that seek to sow the message of the Gospel (e.g., soul-winning).
2. The seed – represents the Word of God.
3. The soil – represents the hearts of the hearers.
4. Note: There is nothing wrong with the seed in any of these cases. The problem is in the condition of the soil. The seed does not need to be adjusted or tampered with to try and make it fit different soils!

B. The Particulars of the Parable (Vs. 14-20)

1. The Wayside Hearer – the Stubborn Heart (Vs. 4, 15)

- a. The ‘wayside’ refers to the narrow paths that crisscross the Galilean landscape, separating the fields and providing both farmers and travellers access through the countryside.” (JM) This would be like the path used by Christ and his disciples to go through the corn fields (Mark 2:23)
- b. The seed doesn’t even penetrate the surface of the soil and is quickly devoured by birds. Whatever the birds missed would be “trampled under foot” (Luke 8:5). Matthew notes that the wayside hearer “understandeth it not” (Matt. 13:19).
- c. This heart is hard and calloused to the Word of God to the point where the seed doesn’t even penetrate. This heart is hardened in unbelief.
- d. Satan moves quickly to remove the seed from their hearts. He uses many means to do this. Highlights how that whenever the

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Gospel sower is working, Satan is active too! (See 2 Cor. 4:4)
He snatches away the seed of the word “**lest they should believe and be saved**” (Luke 8:12)

2. The Stony ground Hearer – the Superficial Heart (Vs. 5-6, 16-17)

- a. ‘likewise’ = they are similar to the wayside hearer. The only difference is that their hard-heartedness is not so easily apparent being buried beneath the surface.
- b. These areas had a thin layer of topsoil covering a limestone layer below. “**A hard-rocky surface, covered with a thin layer of soil.**” (Robertson) The seed germinates quickly in the warm, shallow soil but soon withers in the heat of the sun.
- c. “receive it with gladness” = This hearer has a seemingly positive response to the Word. They get stirred and excited on an emotional level but deep down, the heart remains hard and unrepentant. “Shallow growth is the result of a spiritual experience that is emotionally exhilarating, but intellectually rootless.” (McKenna)
- d. “affliction or persecution...for the word’s sake” = they quickly wither when they start to bear the cost that comes with being a disciple of Christ. This plant dies as rapidly as it grows.
- e. **Remember**, this does not represent someone who is saved then loses their salvation. Rather, it pictures the false professor who on the surface appears to have come to saving faith but in reality, has only a shallow interest in the things of God.
- f. J.C. Ryle: “It is quite possible to feel great pleasure, or deep alarm, under the preaching of the Gospel, and yet to be utterly destitute of the grace of God. The tears of some hearers of sermons, and the extravagant delight of others, are no certain marks of conversion...Their impressions are like Jonah’s gourd, which came up in a night and perished in a night. They fade as rapidly as they grow.”

3. The Thorny ground Hearer – the Suffocated Heart (Vs. 7, 18-19)

These ‘thorns’ are a thorny bramble common to the land of Israel. The word is used in Matt. 27:29 in reference to the crown of thorns. You will notice that both the seed and the thorns spring up together but the thorns quickly outgrow the grain stalk and choke it to death. It is interesting how Matthew notes that “**he** (the hearer) becometh unfruitful”. The seed is strangled by three thorny branches. John Phillips labels them as follows:

- a. Worries – “the cares of this life”. These are the pressures, necessities and distractions of life. Their minds are pulled in different directions. People get so wrapped up in the concerns of here and now that they do not take time to pause and consider their eternal destiny. They rush busily down the broad way tragically unaware of the terrible fate that awaits them at the end.
- b. Wealth – “the deceitfulness of riches”. Riches promise so much joy, satisfaction and fulfilment that millions pursue them full of hopes and expectations, only to find at the end, they have been

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lured into a trap and deceived. 1. Tim. 6:9-10 *“But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare...”* Wealth is dangerous because it “insulates people from the realities of life so they do not feel the need for the Gospel” (Phillips). Heed the challenge of Mark 8:36 *“For what shall it profit a man...”*

- c. **Wants** – “the lusts of other things”. Luke’s Gospel says “pleasures of this life” (Luke 8:14) One of the characteristics of the last days is that men will be “lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God” (2. Tim. 3:4) We live in a society given over to hedonism which means “a devotion to pleasure as a way of life.” How many people reject eternal life in heaven in favour of the temporary pleasures of this life.
- d. **Challenge:** While the primary interpretation refers to an unsaved soul, we can see how there is an application and warning for us as believers. The same things that keep the sinner from getting saved, keep the believer from growth and fruitfulness for the Lord. The ministry of the Word is strangled in their lives because of the **worries, wealth** and **wants** of this life. The Word of God may have an impact on them on a Sunday but it is quickly strangled during the week because of how they live. How thorn infested are the lives of some of God’s people!

4. The Good ground Hearer – the Sincere Heart (Vs. 8, 20)

The central mark of the good ground is that it produces fruit whereas the others do not.

There are two marks that identify the good ground hearer:

- a. Whole hearted reception of the Word – He “heareth the word, and understandeth it” (Matt. 13:23) and “in an honest and good heard, having heard the word, keep it” (Luke 8:15). Romans 10:10 reminds us “For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness...” The Word penetrates deep into this heart, transforming and changing it.
- b. Patient fruit bearing – “and bring forth fruit”. The volume of fruit produced is a startling point in the parable - “some thirty...sixty...an hundred”.
 - i. Farmers in ancient Israel usually expected a six to eightfold yield at harvesttime. Christ’s words represent yields of 3,000, 6,000 and 10,000 percent! (JM)
 - ii. Luke adds the words “with patience” (Luke 8:15). This is in the present tense. They go on bearing fruit as a pattern of life. Jesus said, “...If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed;” (John 8:31) We do not ‘continue’ in order to be saved or keep ourselves saved but we ‘continue’ because we are saved.

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6. Summary: There is a clear lesson and encouragement for us today that we are to continue to sow the seed of the Gospel even in a time of spiritual dryness and famine. The sower in the parable did not discriminate as to where he cast the seed. He spread the seed out on the field, including on the hard, stony and thorny ground. The lesson is that the seed of God's Word has great power and with God's hand of blessing upon it, can bear fruit even in dry and difficult conditions. Let's be faithful to sow the seed in hearts throughout 2023.

III. THE PROFIT FROM THE SOWING (Vs. 12b-14)

God was faithful to His promise to Isaac and blessed him with a bountiful harvest.

A. Isaac Reaped in a time of Famine (Vs. 12b)

1. The cause of the harvest's success is found in the words, "**and the LORD blessed him**". God's hand of blessing was on the seed that had been sown and it brought forth a bountiful harvest. All that matters is that God's hand of blessing is upon us. If God's hand is upon us, we will reap in due season.
2. The success of the crops was no doubt due in part to the water from Isaac's wells. Isaac was a well digger and therefore had access to life giving water. In like manner, we can flourish in desert conditions and flow out in blessing to others if we draw on the wellsprings of the Spirit. John 7:37-39 "In the last day, that great *day* of the feast, Jesus stood and cried, saying, If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, **out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. (But this spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive: for the Holy Ghost was not yet *given*; because that Jesus was not yet glorified.)**"
3. The wells also remind us of the ministry of watering. 1 Cor. 3:6 "I have **planted**, Apollos **watered**; but **God gave the increase**." The sinner often needs multiple contacts with more than one believer before they come through to salvation. You seek to be a link in God's chain!
4. A harvest is promised to those who faithfully reap. Psalm 126:5-6 "They that **sow** in tears **shall reap** in joy. He that goeth forth and weepeth, **bearing precious seed**, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves *with him*." Gal. 6:9 "And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season **we shall reap, if we faint not**."
5. God's Word will not return to void! Isaiah 55:10-11 "For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater: So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: **it shall not return unto me void**, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper *in the thing* whereto I sent it."

B. He Increased in a time of Famine (Vs. 13-14)

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1. God caused Isaac to prosper during this period of His life. **God is not limited by the circumstances!**
2. Several descriptions are given of Isaac's progress:
 - a. "waxed great"
 - b. "went forward"
 - c. "grew"
 - d. "possession of flocks...herds"
 - e. Beyond the fact we are reminded that God can provide our physical needs, may God so work in our lives that we would wax strong in spirit, move forward, grow and enjoy all we possess in Christ through salvation.

Conclusion: Are you a sower for the Lord? Imagine the impact just our church could have if every believer became a regular sower of the seed! Remember to sow in difficult conditions and trust God for a harvest. Draw on the wellsprings of the Spirit so that you can effectively water the seed sown.

1. The Challenge from the Sower – we need to be faithful in spreading the seed plentifully, irrespective of the condition of the soil. As we proclaim the Gospel, we can expect to see these four kinds of responses.
2. The Challenge from the Seed – there is power in the Word of God to accomplish salvation. We do not need to try and alter the seed but simply be faithful to sow it. In time, we will have the joy of seeing the seed fall on good ground and bring forth fruit.
3. The Challenge from the Soil – which soil best represents you? Are you a good ground hearer, allowing your heart to be ploughed and prepared by the Holy Spirit's conviction, receiving the Word in sincerity? Or are you one of the other three? Respond with a true heart to the Gospel.