

# Cultivating Faith

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

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Pastor Jim Rademaker

It's snatched away. It withers away. It's choked off. It takes off. That's what happens when the good news about Jesus comes to a person, when they hear of it, when it's planted in their heart.

Sometimes we might wonder if satan really exists; if he's active today. Jesus highlights one of the primary ways that satan works - **stealing away** the seeds of faith planted in our hearts. *When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path.* We might think, "It's silly. It's not realistic. It's outdated. It's not relative. Another day perhaps."

Sometimes we hear about Jesus and His kingdom for us, and the seed of faith planted in us is *not* stolen away from us, but faith springs up within us. We're moved. We're excited. The heavens are opened! And we receive Jesus with joy! We have *joy, joy, joy, joy down in our hearts.* It's amazing!

But what happens? Problems arise. People see the change in us and are scared. They're upset. Our faith makes them uncomfortable. They don't like the change in us that faith has brought about. They want us to go back to the person we were before. The person they knew. The person they were used to. The person they were comfortable with. And we're dissuaded from our new-found faith. We're pressured to go back to the way we were before. To be like everybody else. To fit in. to be liked.

And especially, if we don't keep feeding our faith. If we don't get involved in regular bible reading, in bible study and discipleship and regular fellowship in the body of Christ, the church, our faith has trouble taking root. And our faith **withers** and dies.

*As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away.*

Sometimes we hear about Jesus and His kingdom for us, and the seed of faith planted in us springs up and takes root in our hearts and grows down deep and becomes established in us. We spend time regularly with God and His church. We grow in our relationship with Jesus and others. And as a result, we withstand the pressures put upon us by others because of our faith. Our faith doesn't wither, but endures.

But what happens? Life begins to take over more and more. We get busy. There's so much to do! We get sidetracked. Work. Family. Homes. Cars. Appliances. Stuff. Activities. Entertainment. Relationships. Commitments. Health concerns. Daily life. And what happens to our faith in Jesus?

*As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches **choke** the word, and it proves unfruitful.* Faith without works. Without fruit. Without anything to show for it. Dead faith.

What happens to the faith that is planted in our hearts? It's snatched away. It withers away. It's choked off and dies a slow death.

Sometimes we hear about Jesus and His kingdom for us, and the seed of faith planted in us springs up and takes root in our hearts and grows down deep and becomes established in us. And it **takes off**. It grows and grows, springing forth abundant fruit in us! *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.* (Galatians 5)

*As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.*

Faith in Jesus. It's snatched away. It withers away. It's choked off. It takes off.

How is it with you? How is God's Word, how is Jesus - the Word become flesh, with you? In your heart? In your mind? In your life? What's snatching away your faith? What's causing your faith to wither away? What's keeping it from

growing; from flourishing and being fruitful? A hardness of heart perhaps? Trials and persecution? The riches and cares and concerns of this world?

How can we continue to grow in Christ? Like the farmer, we can only do so much. And then, we pray - ultimately dependent on God to do what we cannot - cultivating our heart, softening it, making it fertile soil. As the apostle Paul writes to the Colossian believers:

*We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus ... And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God;*

*being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (Colossians 1:3-14)*

What a message! What seed that's planted in hearts! And we never know when it might take root. We never know when it will grow, and mature, and produce a bumper crop. As the commentator Lenski puts it:

"What the parable and its exposition describe is the *final* fate of the Word in the hearts of men. When life is done, some show a harvest, grains running from 30 to 100; all the rest show none. Some never let the Word in, some never let it root, some smothered its growth. But this *final* fate of the Word is shown us *now*, so that we may examine ourselves as to how we are treating the Word *now*, before life is done." (pg. 523)

Before life is done. Before it's too late. If your faith is snatched, or withers, or chocked off, is that it? Is there no hope for you or others?

Have you ever heard of "My Pillow"? The inventor of this pillow shares his conversation story ... from snatched away, to a bumper crop. Have you ever heard of C.S. Lewis, who went from faithless to faithful? Have you ever heard of the Apostle Paul, who went from persecutor to prophet? And there are countless other examples! God's never done, on this side of eternity. There's always hope for faith, even if it's been snatched away, withered away, choked to death!

What does God do so that His Word, so graciously and generously and abundantly sown, might take root and grow and produce a harvest in you and others? Good ground doesn't just appear out of nowhere. Hard ground can't loosen itself. Rocks don't automatically clear themselves. Weeds don't magically disappear on their own. Someone has to what? Cultivate. Work the soil.

*Farmer God* does just that. He plows. He plows *you*. He plows me. He plows our pride and self-righteousness. He plows our indifference and unbelief. He plows our false gods that cause so much worry and anxiety. He plows the hardness in our hearts. Exposing our heart. Breaking it. Softening it. Forgiving it. Preparing it. That *Jesus* might be planted. That *Jesus* might take root. That *Jesus* might grow, producing a bumper crop of faith and good works!

And when those weeds return, when that hardness returns, when those wrong desires return - as they always do - God continues plowing you. Plowing you with His Law Word. Plowing you with trials and struggles. Plowing you with suffering. Plowing you with love. All, to root out of you all that hinders faith in Jesus. That *He* grows in you more and more.

That's why Isaiah could write the words he did: *For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55:10-11)*

How about your faith in the Lord Jesus? Is it rooted? Are you rooted in God's Word, so that when persecution comes your faith won't wither, but stand and endure, continue looking to Jesus and following Him, no matter what, trusting your life in Jesus' hands?

Satan continues to plant his weeds. The world continues to tamp you down. But when you're hearing from God's Word, when you're regularly reading your Bible, when you're gathering with others in Bible Study, when we're coming together on Sunday mornings, when you're sharing the Word with others, the seeds are once again being planted. God continues His work. Plowing and planting, never ceasing - that His Word, that *He*, grow in you, and produce a harvest of faith and fruit, unto eternal life. (James Douthwaite)