

## Peter's Epistles #12

### The Parable of the Sower

(also available on-line at [Ichthys.com](http://Ichthys.com))  
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#### Revised Translation of 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 1:1-2:

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who, though outcasts dispersed throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, were yet selected in the foreknowledge of God the Father, by means of the Holy Spirit's consecration, for the obedience in and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ. Grace and peace be multiplied unto you!

Peter's opening words had acknowledged the suffering of these early believers, affirming that as Christians we are all *outcasts* in this world, *dispersed* throughout every region of the world. But though we are truly "strangers in a strange land" and will never be free from the discomfort which enmity with the world must necessarily cause, we must remember that we are God's elect, specially *selected* by Him on the basis of our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. This special status of "elect" which all Christians share is not given without purpose and carries with it a great responsibility: fulfilling the mission God has for us here in time. Our individual "missions" as Christians (e.g. the "purpose for which we have been sent forth") always entail in some way or other a contribution to the spiritual well-being and progress of our fellow believers.

To help others effectively, we need to grow spiritually ourselves, and so in our previous studies we have stressed the point that the essential purpose of the Christian life is *to grow spiritually and to help others to do the same*.

When we become Christians, we are not suddenly blessed with problem-free lives on this earth. On the contrary, we must now face suffering as a normal part of the Christian life, and as a *necessary* element in the process of spiritual growth. Learning to cope with suffering by trusting God builds up our faith, and the growth of our faith is, in fact what spiritual growth is all about. It is in the wake of acknowledging the difficulties and suffering confronting his readers, therefore, that Peter offers them an emphatic challenge to tackle with vigor the task of spiritual growth when he says in verse 2b, *Grace and peace be multiplied unto you!*

This appeal (placed in the optative mood in Greek to indicate an emphatic wish on Peter's part) is much more than just a formulaic greeting. When Peter tells us "My wish is for an increase of grace and peace for you!", he is encouraging us to grow spiritually, because *spiritual growth is the means to increasing grace and peace*. Grace and peace are really two sides of the same coin. They are both connected with the increased blessing we receive as we grow spiritually. Grace

emphasizes God's role as the giver of blessing, while peace emphasizes the actual blessings we receive from God. Grace is "God giving", while peace is "us receiving". Peter is saying "I want God to give you more, and I want you to get more from God."

We must be careful, however, not to make the mistake of viewing God's blessings in material terms. As a loving Father, God wants what is truly best for us, not what *we* think is best for us. God wants us to be filled with a happiness and confidence that is based securely upon our love for Him and His Son, and not dependent upon our worldly circumstances. This is one reason why suffering is such an important part of God's plan for our lives. Suffering forces us to rely more heavily upon God, and liberates us from the slavish dependence upon material things that unbounded prosperity often brings.

The word "grace" as used here by Peter is the Greek word *charis* (Hebrew *chen*) which means "favor" or "good will". In the New Testament, "grace" is most often used with a special, technical meaning. When we read the word "grace", we should understand the writers of the New Testament to mean God's attitude of "good will" or beneficence directed toward us, His children. We are recipients of this favorable attitude called "grace" (and of all the blessings that attend it) not because of anything we have done, but because, as believers, God now sees us as being one with His Son, Jesus Christ, the One with whom He has always been "well pleased" (Matt.3:17; 17:5).

As *Christ*-ians, we share the favor of God because of our relationship with His Son, Jesus Christ. Before believing in Christ, the perfect justice of God's nature demanded condemnation upon mankind (Rom.1:18-23), but after salvation, once our sins have been covered by the blood of Jesus Christ, we have been "made just" (justified) in God's eyes through the work of His Son (Rom.5:1). God's attitude towards us now is no longer one of condemnation for sin, but one of favor and blessing, that is, one of *grace*. "Grace" means that God wants to bless us (cf. Is.30:18: "He waits on high to bless [Heb. *chanan*] you"), and is perfectly free to do so justly because Jesus Christ has already paid for all our sins.

As recipients of the grace of God, we experience God's peace. Peace is the Greek word *eirene* (from which the name Irene is derived), meaning freedom from strife and care. The New Testament writers, however, never thought of this idea of peace apart from the Hebrew synonym *shalom*. *Shalom* means more than just the absence of trouble; it means contentment, happiness, rest, and serenity as well. *Shalom*, which is used as a friendly greeting in Israel today, means to be complete, lacking nothing.

As believers, we really are lacking in nothing. We are son's of God, heirs of all His promises, guaranteed an eternal home, and life eternal in the presence of God and His Son forever. We even have the Holy Spirit given to us at salvation as a seal and pledge of our wondrous life to come, and as a helper for us in this life as well.

When Peter wishes for this peace (and the grace that supplies it) to increase, he is really asking us to appreciate what we already have, to take great comfort in it, and to exploit it energetically to the glory of God. Peter's wish is that we *grow*. Peter's wish is for our *faith* (the issue in growth) to solidify and expand. For spiritual growth is, essentially, the growth of personal faith. Of course faith will have its results (love, ministry, etc.), but all true Christian good works are based on faith. We are saved by *believing* in our Lord, Jesus Christ; we grow by *believing* His teachings, and putting them into practice.

### **An Overview of Spiritual Growth: The Parable of the Sower**

The parable of the sower occurs in all three of the synoptic gospels (Matt.13:1-9; Mk.4:1-9; Lk.8:4-8), and is explained by Jesus in Matt.13:18-23; Mk.4:13-20; Lk.8:11-15. Though dealing primarily with salvation, it is significant for us because it helps to explain the mechanics of spiritual growth. For just as many attitudes toward Christ are possible, but only one, that of faith, leads to salvation, so also many attitudes toward His teachings are possible, but only one, that of faith, leads to spiritual growth. In the parable, a sower goes out to sow seed in four different types of ground: hard ground (by the roadside), rocky ground, thorny ground, and good ground. The seed that falls on the hardened ground beside the road is quickly stolen away by birds; the seed that falls on the rocky ground springs up quickly, but perishes because its roots lack depth; the seed that falls on the thorny ground is choked by the weeds that grow up around it; but the seed that falls on good ground prospers and produces a bountiful crop. Jesus explains the hard ground as the person whom Satan causes to reject the gospel; the rocky ground as the person who abandons the gospel in times of distress; the thorny ground as the person distracted from the gospel by the cares and worries of life; and the good ground as the person who actually produces fruit for God in this life.

This parable outlines for us the four basic types of responses to the gospel, only one of which results in saving faith and true spiritual growth. The common elements of its interpretation are as follows: the "seed" which is sown is the Word of God, the gospel message which proclaims Jesus as the Christ, and which tells us that salvation comes only by faith in Christ. The "plant" in each case is the faith of the person in question. The "ground" represents the heart of different kinds of people. It is important to note that *we* decide which type of ground we shall be. Whether we are hard or rocky, thorny or good, is our responsibility.

**HARD GROUND (faith stillborn):** The "hard ground" person hears the gospel message, but chooses not to believe in Christ. The "birds" who snatch away the seed and eat it before it can sprout are explained by Jesus as Satan snatching away the Word from the person's heart. As ground by the roadside is hard-packed, and impenetrable to seed, so the hearts of many are hardened to the message of salvation by faith in Christ. Their hearts are so calloused against the truth of the gospel that they are unable to receive it. Luke's account of the parable (8:5) provides an additional detail which helps to explain the problem, when he tells us that this seed is "trodden down" by the passersby. In the same way, for those who refuse to take it into their hearts immediately, the truth of the gospel is often belittled by those around them, leading to a rejection

of Christ. Jesus explains this process as Satan "snatching away" what, upon hearing the gospel, has been sown "in their heart". Satan does this "so that they might not *believe and be saved*" (Lk.8:12). Matthew's account (13:19) explains the process: all such people have "heard the word", but they have not "understood" it. "Understanding" or comprehension of God's truth, as we have seen, comes only by *faith*. For people with "hard ground" hearts, their unwillingness to believe means that they will never understand the "so-great salvation" that they have let slip by (Heb.2:3), and it will remain just so much "foolishness" to them (1Cor.1:18ff.). How does Satan accomplish this feat? We must point out that although he does influence these people, the ultimate responsibility for accepting (or rejecting) Jesus Christ lies with every person individually.

Each of the three accounts of this parable uses a different name for Satan, giving us a clue to his methods in deceiving the unbeliever and encouraging him to ignore the gospel. Matthew refers to him as "the evil one" and it is typical of his evil methods to *substitute lies* for the truth. Mark refers to him as "Satan", a Hebrew name meaning "adversary", and Satan *opposes* the truth wherever it is found. Luke refers to him as "the devil", a Greek word meaning "slanderer", and we can be sure that the devil will *slander* the truth of the gospel at every opportunity. When an unbeliever holds the precious message about Christ in his heart, weighing it and considering it, our adversary the devil does everything in his power to try and influence such a person to reject the gospel. He does this not by personal appearance, of course, but by using all the lies, fears, and deceptions the individual in question has assimilated throughout his life. This world (temporarily) is the devil's world (Jn.14:30), and the devil has filled it to overflowing with propaganda favorable to his cause. You can be sure whenever someone is considering becoming a Christian that as "the evil one" he will try to confuse the issue with lies (opposing the true principle of salvation by faith in Christ with the false one of salvation by works, for example); that as the "adversary" he will try to turn the prospective Christian back using fear and threats (reminding him of the costs and dangers, be they physical or merely social, of being identified as "Christian", for example); that as "the slanderer" he will try and make the unbeliever doubt the veracity of the simple message about Christ (by calling into question the motives of those giving the gospel message, for example). Mark's account tells us that Satan acts "quickly", snatching away the seed of truth before it has had any chance to take root and produce genuine faith. The seed was good, but faith was stillborn in the hard heart.

**ROCKY GROUND (faith destroyed):** The "rocky ground" person hears the gospel message and actually does believe in Christ, but this "faith" of his is only transitory. As a result, though his faith "plant" springs up quickly as he receives "with joy" the message of deliverance from sin, and the promise of eternal life through faith in Christ, this temporary faith is quickly scorched and withered by the burning sun. Jesus explains the sun in the parable as the persecution and trouble that inevitably befall every believer. The "rocky ground" person has not "counted the cost" of discipleship (Lk.14:28ff.), so that when his faith meets serious opposition, it dies.

In the case of the "hard ground" person, faith could not even take root. The "rocky ground" person, on the other hand, has roots, but his "roots" (or degree of commitment to his new faith)

are insufficiently deep. This is because there is no "depth of soil". Faith takes root in his heart, but before it can grow, it runs into an impenetrable barrier of rock. You cannot say "this far but no farther" to God. You cannot give Jesus Christ a partial commitment. Believers are left in the devil's world after salvation for the express reason of being tested to demonstrate that their faith is genuine. No partial commitment, no faith that holds God at arms length can possibly survive the scorching heat of the day.

Jesus (in Matthew and Mark) explains that in time of testing such individuals "are offended" (KJV). This verb is based on the Greek word *skandalon* (the origin of the English word scandal), and is used in the Septuagint to translate two Hebrew words, one meaning "stumbling block", another meaning "trap". Both aspects of the word are appropriate here to describe the half-hearted convert whose walk of faith is "tripped up" by persecution, trouble, and testing, and who finds himself "baited and snared" by the devil's attempts to get him to revert to his former life. Jesus' words in Luke are even more specific: "[They] believe for a while, but in the time of testing they *fall away* [from the faith]." The Greek verb for falling away here is the same from which we derive the word apostasy, and its meaning is unmistakable: such people did believe, temporarily, but under the pressure of testing found it convenient to abandon their faith. The seed was good, but faith could not take permanent root in their rocky heart.

**THORNY GROUND (faith stunted):** The "thorny ground" person does put his faith in Christ, but thorns also grow up in his heart. These "thorns" are worldly distractions which compete for his allegiance with the "faith-plant", and eventually win, choking faith back. Such a person "hears the word", but the Word of God sown in his heart is strangled and overcome by a variety of other matters which prove to be more important to him than Jesus Christ. How could this happen?

The two main categories of distractions which alienate us from Christ will help us to understand the process Jesus refers to here. These two categories are (1) fear and (2) lust. The devil's world is filled with problems for everyone, especially believers in Jesus Christ, all of whom find themselves targets of Satan's opposition. As normal people, we are all subject to worries and desires every day of our lives, but it is essential that we view these two primary sources of pressure on our faith from the correct (that is to say, the *heavenly*) perspective. We would not be human if we never got worried about our jobs, our families, our health, or our lives, but from God's perspective, there really is no reason to worry.

Certainly, this is a difficult concept for us mortals to accept, especially when our trouble and pain get particularly acute. But when Jesus tells us "not to worry" about what we shall eat, drink, or wear because "your Heavenly Father knows you have need of all these things" (Matt.6:25), He is showing us the heavenly point of view. God knows all of our problems, and is right here, right now, making sure that all our difficulties work out to our ultimate good (Rom.8:28). Worry and fear will continue to confront us throughout our lives, but we must never let them *control* us. We must remember that God is mightier than anything we fear, and that He is here helping us. Furthermore, the problems of this life will not endure forever. The accounts of Matthew and Mark stress that such worries are "the worries of this life" only. As Christians, we should set our

hope upon the future, to the time when we shall never experience fear or worry again (Is.25:8; Rev.21:4).

The person with the thorny heart does not trust God enough. When problems befall him, he doesn't believe that God will see him through, and so his faith shrivels.

The thorny hearted individual has similar problems when confronting his lusts. Along with worries and fears, we can also expect lusts and desires to be a constant part of our lives. Since the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, all human beings have had to cope with "the sin in the flesh" (Rom.7:17) and the destructive lusts it generates. The representative lust given in all three accounts of this parable is the lust for wealth. The problem is not money (a necessity for living in the world), but the "love of money" (1Tim.6:10). The thorny heart allows desire for riches to replace his devotion to God. As Jesus says in this parable, wealth is "deceptive". It can trick us into abandoning our reliance upon God, and replacing Him with a new master: money (Matt.6:24).

It is an illusion to think that wealth will solve all our problems, and to exchange our confidence in the Creator and Sustainer of the universe for a false confidence in the transient and deceptive riches of this world is a poor bargain indeed. Jesus warned us against the futility of laying up riches on earth "where the moth destroys and the thief breaks in and steals" (Matt.6:19ff.). He told us rather to "lay up treasures in heaven" for "where your treasure is, there your heart shall be too". What advantage is there to gaining the riches of the entire world, Jesus asks us, if we must forfeit our eternal life in return (Matt.16:26)? The thorny ground person ignores these warnings, and allows fear and desire to take over his heart and stunt the growth of his faith. As a result, "he bears no fruit", the very opposite of the purpose God intends for our Christian lives (Jn.15:16).

As we have stressed repeatedly in this study, we are here on earth *to grow and to help others to grow*. This is the "fruit" which God intends for us to produce. In its simplest form, this "fruit" is the increase of our faith, and the faith of others through the help we provide to them. It is easy to proclaim that we "have faith", but, as James points out, "faith without works" (that is, without some tangible expression of faith) "is dead" (Jas.2:17). Many people misunderstand the "works" of James chapter two. James is not referring to particular "good deeds" (such as the donation of money, or becoming a missionary). Rather, James has in mind obedience to God, especially when it is very hard to obey, when there is a need for strong, demonstrable faith. James has in mind those times in our life when we must take some difficult step of faith, but, when once done, we can look back and say in confidence "I never would have been able to do this if I had not trusted in God."

James picks just such an example to illustrate his point: God's command to Abraham to sacrifice his only son Isaac. With "hindsight", we know that everything worked out fine. God stopped Abraham before he killed his son, and provided instead a ram for the sacrifice - a clear picture of Christ taking our place on the cross and being judged for our sins as our substitute. But Abraham could not have known what would happen. Besides knowing that he had been ordered to do a

terrible, unthinkable thing that seemed sure to obliterate the hopes of a lifetime, he had only one other piece of information to consider: the character of the God he knew and loved.

For our faith to grow, we have to do as Abraham did. We have to face *with faith* the hard, sometimes seemingly impossible situations that become the stuff of our spiritual growth. Armed only with our knowledge of God's character, and our faith in His goodness, and concern for us, we too must overcome what we fear (and what we desire) by trusting in God. After we do, along with Abraham we can look back to such trials and know with certainty that our faith is real. The thorny ground person, on the other hand, has no such experiences to recall. He has never "leaned" on God in times of trial and testing, and so has no "works" (or results) to show. The cares and concerns of this world distract him from God, so that he looks elsewhere when tried or tempted. Though he accepts the message about Jesus "with joy", he never (as Luke's account says) "brings his fruit to completion".

We may rightly ask whether such a person is really a Christian. True faith in Christ is the mark of the believer, and we know that it is possible for faith to perish and be replaced by unbelief (Rom.11:20-21). Even if the "thorny ground" category includes some true Christians (if stunted and marginal), we would do well to consider the danger of such a status, for during the terrible persecutions to come at the end of this age (i.e. the "tribulation"), it is predicted that the pressure of events will cause many such half-hearted Christians to fall away (Matt.24:10-12; 2Thes.2:3; 2Pet.2:1-22). Only a living faith can bring us through the struggles of this life and our own personal tribulations. Ultimately we must choose whether we shall trust God or listen instead to our fears and lusts. Where the thorns of fear and unchecked desire grow wild, true reliance on God cannot prosper. The seed was good, but the faith at first received with joy was soon strangled in the thorny heart.

**GOOD GROUND (faith growing):** "Good ground" is the ideal for which we, as Christians, should all strive. The "good ground" person believes in Jesus Christ and continues to grow as a believer thereafter. Absent from his heart are the hard-packed surface unwilling to receive God's teachings, the under-layer of rock preventing the Word of God from taking hold, and the thorns of fear and desire choking the life out of his newly sprouted faith. The heart of the "good ground" person, as Jesus tells us in Luke's account (8:15), is a "fit and good" one.

Both Greek words here can be translated "good", but the distinction between them is important. The first, *kalos*, means here something that is suitable for use (as in a "good" harbor "fit" to receive ships). The "good ground" person's heart is able to receive the seed of God's message about Jesus because it is willing to do so, and is therefore "fit". The second Greek word, *agathos*, on the other hand, means something that is apt to produce the right results (as in a "good" soldier who fights well). Thus the good heart also provides a fertile environment for the "faith plant" (newly sprung from the seed of God's Word) to continue to grow and bear fruit. The amount of production may vary (Mk.4:8), but note that it is only "good ground" which produces a crop, and that all ground which is truly good does produce.

When we heard the good news about Jesus Christ, we accepted it with joy, and faith flourished in our hearts. Let us take care to nurture the "plant of faith" within us, and not lose heart when God prunes it (Jn.15:2). Let us take care to preserve our faith, to remain part of the true vine, Jesus Christ, that we may bear the fruit He would have us bear in due season (Jn.15:5).

"Faith comes from hearing" (Rom.10:17), but not all who heard believed (the hard ground did not), not all who believed kept their faith (the rocky ground did not), not all who maintained some measure of faith were productive for the Lord (the thorny ground was not). The issue, then, is not whether or not one has heard the Word, but what one *does* with the Word once received. This issue is one which is key to our continued spiritual growth, because the pattern expressed in this parable of accepting or rejecting the gospel message, is repeated for us as Christians every time we hear the Word of God. Hearing is not enough. If we reject the teaching of God's Word outright (the hard ground pattern), abandon it in time (the rocky ground pattern), or allow it to take second place to our worldly concerns (the thorny ground pattern), we endanger our spiritual growth, and we place our faith at risk.

All three gospel accounts of our parable address the issue of believing, that is, of putting our faith in God's Word. In all three accounts of our Lord's parable, the good heart hears the Word, but in all three, it does more. Mark's account says that such a person both hears and "receives" it (Greek *paradechomai*): he accepts the truth of the Bible, even when that may be difficult for him. Matthew's account says that he both hears and "perceives" it (Greek *sunieimi*): he gains insight into the truth of God's Word by perceiving with his faith rather than with his eyes (2Cor.5:7). Luke's account says that he both hears and "retains" it (Greek *katecho*): he holds fast to the truth of the Word in spite of his troubles. In its reception, perception through faith, and retention of God's Word, the good heart is good because it is *willing* to continue its growth and to produce fruit for the Lord. It is *willing* to grow spiritually and helps others do the same.

**GRACE AND PEACE:** Peter's wish for us in verse two is that "grace and peace be multiplied unto us", in other words, that we meet the challenge of spiritual growth aggressively, exploiting God's bountiful grace resources and enjoying the marvelous spiritual peace that results. This we shall never do if we harden ourselves to reject God's Word (hard ground), or fail to allow it to penetrate deeply into our hearts so that it has no roots to stand against adversity (rocky ground), or allow it to be diluted and lost amidst the problems and troubles of our daily lives (thorny ground). No, just as we were saved by believing in Jesus, we shall only grow up spiritually if we are *willing* to seek out His teachings, and to grow by accepting them, understanding them, and retaining them *in faith*.