



"Affliction, like the iron-smith, shapes as it smites."
—Christian Bovee

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The Endurance of the Firstfruits (Part Two)

Even though in general God's harvest of His sons and daughters in the resurrection *will* be a success, we should consider that, individually, it may not be. We do not care to think about it, but we can [fall away](#) and neglect or reject God's gifts through what we do during our period of conversion, typified by the seven-[Sabbath count to Pentecost](#). The Parable of the Sower and the Seed in Matthew 13 exemplifies a number of things that can happen to prevent us from having a place in God's spiritual harvest. We will focus on the second scenario, where the seed falls on stony places without much earth:

Some fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth; and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth. But when the sun was up they were scorched, and because they had no root they withered away. ([Matthew 13:5-6](#))

Jesus' interpretation appears in [Matthew 13:20-21](#):

But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with [joy](#); yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles.

The question arises as to whether the people represented here were ever converted, as the parable does not specify one way or the other. However, there are good reasons why we should consider that it could apply to the converted. For one thing, only in the context of the first group—the seed sown by the wayside—does it say that the Word of [God](#) is not understood ([Matthew 13:19](#)), indicating a lack of conversion. The first group could consist of anyone who hears the truth but lacks the ability to respond correctly to it as the [firstfruits](#) have. This description is absent from the other scenarios, seeming to be specific to the seed that lands by the wayside.

Additionally, the Bible gives multiple warnings and reproofs that relate to the conditions found in the second scenario. Any one of us could find ourselves in this scenario, at least in principle. In the same way, the third scenario—involving the cares of this life and the deceitfulness of riches—is also one to which a converted person could succumb, which is why we find many biblical warnings about the [love](#) of money and the pulls of [the world](#). They have the potential to play out in the lives of people whom God has given the Holy Spirit.

In this second scenario, the truth of God fails to penetrate deeply because of the soil's stony condition. The parable is describing an underlying hardness of heart, equated in Scripture with unbelief ([Mark 6:52](#); [8:17](#); [16:14](#); [Hebrews 3:7-19](#)). The individual, receiving the truth, believes some of it—some fertile soil is present—but since it is not deep enough, he cannot endure when times worsen. He withers because his depth of belief—his relationship with Christ—is insufficient to sustain him throughout the difficulties that inevitably arise when one is living God's way and constrained by His Word. He may start out strong, but in the end, there is nothing to harvest.

In verse 5, [Jesus](#) says that the stony places had little dirt, and the plants immediately sprang up. He describes a thin layer of soil on top of bedrock. Interestingly, the presence of bedrock close to the surface creates an environment that retains both heat and moisture in the dirt. The bedrock absorbs the heat from the sun during the day and keeps the soil warm, while simultaneously preventing rainwater from soaking in deeply and leaving the topsoil dry. These conditions are ideal for the seed, so visible growth occurs

in short order. But such growth cannot be sustained because these same conditions keep the plant from developing healthy roots. Its growth becomes stunted, even though it appears to start off so well.

The overall lesson of this second scenario, however, is that the speed of apparent growth is far less important than the depth and health of the roots providing that growth. The seven Sabbaths in the count to Pentecost symbolically represent a long time, and during it, many trials will arise in which healthy roots are more valuable than stems and leaves, which may look healthy for a time but cannot endure to the end.

The parable employs a scorching sun to illustrate tribulation or persecution. The tribulation Jesus mentions is general and not specific to the time of Jacob's Trouble. The word simply means "[affliction](#)," "trouble," or "pressure." In [Acts 14:22](#), Paul and [Barnabas](#) tell some new converts, "We must through many tribulations enter the [kingdom of God](#)." The road is not only difficult but also long—remember, this holy day looks back on a substantial duration of time. Deep roots are required to survive spiritually through the long weeks in the sun. For this reason, the Bible makes patient endurance a regular theme, mentioning it seven times in the [book of Revelation](#) alone. Four of those mentions appear in the [letters to the seven churches](#) (Revelation 2 and 3). Patient endurance is a vital requirement for the end-time church.

Typically, the major catastrophes of life are not what overwhelm God's people and cause them to suffer spiritual collapse. Instead, it is the lighter, repeated, relentless blows of tribulation that pummel us to the breaking point and make us want to throw in the towel. But God promises us that He will not allow the temptation—the trial—to go beyond what we can bear ([1 Corinthians 10:13](#)).

It is entirely possible for a tender plant to survive the scorching sun! Doing so, though, depends on the condition of the heart—whether it is stony and hard or whether it is pliable and conducive to God's work in us. In Part Three, we will explore hardness of heart and discover how we can prevent it from undermining our Christian growth.

- David C. Grabbe

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Without a Parable](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh (1932-2023)

We are called to a lifetime of decisions and judgments. We have problems with judging in different groups of the greater Church of God, of which at least three claim to be the only true church. This intemperate judgment may come back to bite the biter in a painful place. Judgments must always be open to new information; a fellow servant never falls on our judgment or estimation of him. It is terribly difficult at times to recognize the tare or to recognize the true wheat. Christ's judgments are made according to what each person has been given. We need to internalize this practice of judging and evaluating, especially regarding our brother or fellow servant. We cannot possibly know the levels of gifting God has bestowed on the other members of God's family. Just because we understand an aspect of spiritual truth does not mean that God has gifted the other member to comprehend it, or vice versa. God gifts each person as it pleases Him. God provides the hearing ear, understanding, and wisdom, both in the physical and spiritual dimensions. Not everybody has ears to hear in both dimensions. Even the converted do not comprehend the full spectrum of parable-centric teaching, often containing multiple layers of meaning. The secret things belong to God; the revealed things become our property on a need-to-know basis, only when we have developed the ability to use the information responsibly, using the mind of Christ. We have been given spiritual gifts to serve the entire congregation as they are needed.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[Light Affliction?](#)

by Pat Higgins

Affliction seems to be an integral part of Christianity. Our Savior Jesus Christ and His apostles suffered a great deal during their ministries, and

though modern Christians' burdens cannot compare to theirs, they are still significant enough to cause great pain. Pat Higgins demonstrates the relative nature of Christian affliction, urging believers to take the Bible's long view of their suffering.

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