

The Covenant Pulpit



"Power Seed"

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Jim was one of life's losers. Rejected by his parents and shunned by his schoolmates, he retreated into a world of unbearable loneliness and self-loathing. His only comfort was stuffing himself with food until he became grotesquely obese. His flabby white face was covered with pimples and scarred with acne. He reeked of body odor and painfully stuttered whenever he opened his mouth.

Over the years Jim became a social outcast, consumed with thoughts of suicide. But one day, as he walked down a London side street, he looked into an open doorway and saw a ragtag collection of fellow losers seated expectantly on folding chairs. The sign on the door told him that this was the meeting hall of the Communist Party. A well-dressed man greeted him warmly. Jim couldn't remember the last time anyone had given him a welcoming smile. He handed Jim a flyer with a single line across it:

"No matter who you are, we can turn you into a leader of men."

His curiosity piqued, Jim took the seat closest to the door. The speaker was Douglas Hyde, a leader in the British Communist Party and the editor of the *Daily Worker*. Hyde concluded his mesmerizing speech with a bold claim: "I don't care who you are, if you will give yourself to the Communist party, we will make you into a leader who will change the world." A tiny seed of hope was planted in the fertile soil of Jim's imagination. He rushed to the podium and blurted out, "C-c-c-comrade, I w-w-w-want you to t-t-take me and t-t-t-turn me into a l-l-leader of m-m-m-men."

Douglas Hyde later wrote that he groaned within. He had never seen a sorer mess of human material. But he had made the claim. So he gulped, and welcomed Jim into the socialist workers brotherhood. Jim was assigned to a trainer and a small group of dedicated comrades. After a few days he was sent to the mean streets of London to hand out copies of the *Daily Worker*. Ridiculed and assaulted, he returned with his soul battered and bruised. The seed that sprouted a dream had been yanked out by its roots. He cried out in defeat, "I c-c-can't do it!" But his comrades wouldn't let him give up. They replanted the seed, watered his dream with encouragement, fertilized it with hope, and pulled away the weeds of rejection and defeat.

Slowly and inexorably Jim was transformed from a loser into a leader; from a depressed stutterer into a dynamic speaker; from a recluse to the greatest union organizer the British Communist Party had ever seen. Years later, his death was front page news in both the *Daily Worker* and *London Times*. Factories shut down as thousands of workers together with members of the British Parliament attended his funeral.

Douglas Hyde, who left the Communist Party after he converted to Catholicism, laments in his book, *Dedication and Leadership* that, although

Communists believe humans are soulless products of evolution, they often have more faith in their message to transform people than do most Christians. Jesus wants to challenge our lack of faith in his *Parable of the Sower* in Luke 8. It hinges on verse eleven: "This is the meaning of the parable: the seed is the word of God." This is the principle we learn today:

Never underestimate the power of a seed.

A seed is one of life's great mysteries. Take a seed the size of a freckle. Put it under several inches of dirt. Give it enough water, light, and fertilizer. Then get ready for a miracle that still confounds scientists. A mountain will be moved by that seed. It doesn't matter if the dirt is a zillion times the weight of the seed. That seed will push it back. And from that single seed a plant will be born with enough seeds to produce more plants in a chain of life that will eventually feed millions of people for countless generations.

Never underestimate the power of a seed, especially when it is the word of God. Jesus knows how easy it is to lose faith in the power of his seed. When he gives this parable, he is at the height of his popularity; the Galilean Idol; a religious superstar who has taken his nation by storm. Massive crowds are following him. But he knows that everything is about to unravel. Within weeks the fickle crowds will fade away until he is left with a meager handful of followers. The whole world will turn against him. In the end, even his closest disciples will desert him while he faces his cross alone.

He wants his disciples (then and now) to know that people will fall away. But we can't get discouraged. He tells us that not all hearts are ready for the seed. Some will be so hard that the seed won't penetrate. Others will be so shallow that it can't take root. Still others will be filled with thistles and thorns that will choke out any growth. Sowing seed calls for dogged persistence and tenacious faith. If you want instant results, or judge your success by the size of your harvest, you will soon give up in disillusionment.

Seldom has this parable been more relevant than in our postmodern age. Like the disciples of old, we might be tempted to underestimate the power of the seed when we see the crowds dwindling and the culture turning away from our Master and his message. We are facing a crisis today. On average there are three Bibles per household in America. But, according to a recent Gallup Poll, the number of people who look at a Bible each week has dropped from 73% in 1985 to 37% today. Only seven percent are part of a Bible study group, down from 21% in 1990. Less than 50% of Americans can name all four gospels. Less than 40% can name 5 of the 10 Commandments.

Pollster George Barna's research shows that increasingly Evangelicals reject the accuracy of the Bible, the existence of Satan, and that Jesus was sinless. When given the 13 most basic teachings of the Bible, only one percent firmly embraces all thirteen. The verse they most widely know is, "God helps those who help themselves," which not only isn't in the Bible, but is opposed to its central message. More than 12% of evangelicals polled identified Joan of Arc as the wife of Noah. Barna concludes, "The Christian body in America is functionally illiterate when it comes to the Bible."

Yale theology professor, George Lindbeck writes, "When I first came to Yale, even those who came from non-religious backgrounds knew the Bible better than students now who come from churchgoing families." Theologian David Wells adds, "I have watched with growing disbelief as the evangelical church has cheerfully plunged into astounding theological illiteracy."

An Old Testament prophet predicted our age when he said in Amos 8:11, "'The days are coming,' declares the Sovereign Lord, 'when I will send a famine through the land—not a famine of food or thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord.'" Barna would agree with Amos. He warns, "There is a growing unwillingness to transmit biblical knowledge and value to the next generation. Churches are not as interested in the systematic teaching of Scripture as in being places that deliver emotional therapy and 'feel good' experiences."

Lest we underestimate the power of the seed, Jesus gives this promise in verse eight: "Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop a hundred times more than was sown." When we turn from scattering it to other pursuits, we have forfeited the only thing that will ever transform us, our churches, or the world. Here are three truths about this power seed:

1. This seed is more powerful than Sonora 64 or IR8

Verse eleven says, "The seed is the word of God." Some seed is more powerful than others. In the 1960s scientists predicted a massive worldwide famine. They targeted India as the epicenter of this famine. At that time India was incapable of feeding its 440 million people. It was estimated that more than a 100 million Indians would die of starvation. But agronomist Norman Borlang had an idea that would change the world. In Mexico he had created a super seed called *Sonora 64*. The agricultural establishment dismissed him as a "mad scientist." But this eccentric visionary took his seed to India. The results of his wonder wheat were spectacular, but not as fantastic as his super rice seed called IR8. In fields that had produced 5 tons of rice, IR8 brought in 50 tons. Norman Borlang launched an agricultural revolution and today India, with a billion people, produces a food surplus. When asked what kept him going when everyone laughed at him, Borlang said, "I have always believed in the power of a seed."

We contain, in our Bibles, a seed so powerful that it makes *Sonora 64* and *IR8* look like child's play. A world suffering from a spiritual famine is desperate for this seed. Do you know the power of God's Word?

1) The power to create something out of nothing

Genesis 1:1&2 says, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the face of the deep..." The Genesis account of creation uses words like *formless*, *empty*, *darkness*, and *deep* to describe a vast empty and silent nothingness. The most maddening mystery for scientists is how something could come from nothing. Atheistic evolutionists doggedly hold to a blind *faith* that somehow something came from nothing without the intervention of a higher power. But Genesis answers, "In the beginning God created..." How did he do it? Genesis 1:3 declares, "And God said, 'Let there be light and there was light.'" The original Hebrew is much stronger: "And God said, 'Light be!' And light was." Such is the power of God's Word.

He speaks two words and dark becomes light. Chaos becomes order. Nothing becomes something. How many stars fill the night skies with light? Scientists calculate a number beyond our capacity to name, 70 plus 21 zeros: 70,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 stars. All of that from two words: "Light be!" Read the rest of Genesis One, and then look through a telescope at the vast macrocosm, and through a microscope at the intricacies of the microcosm. Study DNA and see in a single cell a vast complexity that rivals the heavens. God spoke a word and planted the seed of his dreams for his creation in the soil of nothingness. What is faith? Hebrews 11:2 says that it is to believe that "...the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what is visible." Do you believe that God could speak to a barren womb like Sarah's, and a nation could be born? Or that he would speak to a virgin's womb and his infinite and eternal Son could become a two-celled zygote?

Do you believe that you can speak God's promises from Scripture when you are desperate, and something can come from nothing? Do you believe that you could pray to God using his Scripture, and things you cannot see, or would be impossible to accomplish, could become reality? Do you believe that you could speak his word to your rebellious children, or your unsaved husband, or your irreligious neighbor, and that seed of God's Word would produce something redemptive in their lives even though you see nothing of faith in them now? If Norman Borland could believe in the power of *Sonora 64* and *IR8* when agronomists around the world said he was crazy, and if Jim could believe in the promises of a Communist speaker when everyone else said he would never amount to anything, why wouldn't we scatter the seed of God's Word when it creates universes out of nothing?

2) To call the dead back to life.

In verse ten of the parable, Jesus reminds of the impossibility of people to understand the gospel: "...though seeing, they may not see; though hearing they may not hear..." The most impossible thing you will ever do is to share the gospel with a nonbeliever. In Ephesians 2:1 he describes our condition before we were saved: "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins..." He is saying that we may have been very much alive, but spiritually we were corpses. Corpses can't hear, see, reason, or respond. They are dead. Evangelism is a call to the impossible. But the seed has power where we don't. St. Paul writes of this seed in Romans 1:17, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes; first for the Jew, then for the Gentile." How powerful is the gospel (the seed that we scatter)? St. Paul calls it "the power of God." The Greek word for power is *dynamis*, from which we get our word dynamite. This is explosive seed. When it gets inside a spiritually dead person, it detonates. Eyes are opened, ears are unstopped, the hard surface of a heart is broken into smithereens, and a spiritual earthquake takes place inside. Such is the power of God's Word in a spiritual corpse.

In John 11:43 Jesus stood before the tomb of his friend Lazarus. He had been in that tomb for so long that his corpse was stinking to high heavens. He was bound up in strips of linen, the perfect picture of spiritual deadness. But Jesus shouts, "Lazarus, come out!" Without a moment's hesitation John 11:44 says, "The dead man came out." It reminds you of Genesis 1:23, "Light be!" and light was." This is God in the flesh bringing something out of nothing, and life from death. Jesus had to be specific and say, "Lazarus, come out!" or every dead man and woman in the world would have come out of their graves. And a few days later, on Easter morning God said, "Jesus, come out!" And our Lord rose from the dead. No wonder St. Paul said in Romans 1:17, "I am not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God..." Why are we ashamed to share our faith? Why do we water down this gospel to make it palatable? Why do we dress it up to make it fashionable? Or genetically alter it to make some kind of *Sonora 64*? With all apologies to *Nike*: Just do it! Just scatter it! Then get ready for an explosion.

3) To demolish strongholds

In 2 Corinthians 10:3 St. Paul says, "...we do not wage war as the world does." We are in a war. All around us, and in us, the enemies of our Faith are entrenched in strongholds. They hold the high ground in massive fortresses in Washington DC, in the Hollywood media, in the pornography of the Internet, in our schools, in our churches, in our marriages, within each of us—addictions, bitterness that won't let go, insecurities and anxieties that rule us, fears that hold us back, and pride that causes us to stumble and fall. From these strongholds,

the enemies of our soul come out to do battle with us. What is our weapon? St. Paul tells us in Ephesians 6:17 that it is "...the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God." How powerful is that word? He goes on in 2 Corinthians 10:4&5 to describe this weapon's power: "...they have the divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to God." We are called to demolish these strongholds, all their arguments and pretensions, and even to take prisoners of war those false thoughts and lies that used to make us cringe with fear and give up without a fight. Do you believe that this power seed can shake the earth and make fortresses fall? Do you know the Word of God? Do you use its promises when you begin to fear, repeat its truths when you are attacked by lies, and stand on its assurances when you feel like giving in or giving up? The apostle says, "Resist the devil and he will flee." Lies can never stand up to truth. If the church ever abandons the word then the battle is over. But if we stand firm and confident, scattering this seed, victory will be ours!

4) To accomplish its purposes

In Isaiah 51:11 the prophet reminds us the seed sown always accomplishes its purpose to give bread for the hungry. He goes on to say in verse 11, "So does my word that goes out from my mouth; it will not return empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." Sometimes we pray the promises of Scripture and don't see answers. We sow the seed of God's Word in our children's lives and don't see them living for Christ. We share the gospel with a friend and they reject God's word. A pastor preaches faithfully for years and no revival comes. After years of praying and sowing seed, that unsaved spouse still hasn't come to Jesus. The nation still hasn't repented and turned to God. If anything things get worse, not better. Isaiah must have felt that way. Right from the beginning, in Isaiah Six, when he told God that he would go as a prophet to a sinful nation, God responded by telling him the words that Jesus quotes in Luke 8:10 that the Israelites would hear, but *never* understand; see, but *never* perceive. As far as we know, Isaiah preached for years, but never led a single person to repentance. In fact, the longer Isaiah preached, the worse Israel got. But God wants us to understand in Isaiah 55:11: we don't scatter seeds for *our* purposes, nor does it always accomplish what *we* wish it would. God is specific: "It will accomplish what *I* desire and achieve the purposes for which *I* sent it." Sometimes we feel so empty in our sowing. But he says, "It will not return empty."

We do not determine the success of the harvest. God does. We are not even required to bring in a harvest. We are only called to scatter the seed. In this world, people might evaluate our success on the visible harvest we brought in. Pastors with big churches get more kudos. People with spiritual kids are deemed successful parents. People who have led more people to Christ, or had

more answers to their prayers, are seen as blessed of God. But when we get to heaven, God will only ask one thing: "Did you obey me, step out on faith, and scatter seed?" Don't look at the results today. Just believe that every word of God you scatter will accomplish *his* purpose.

2. You can learn a lot from Egyptian mummies and traveling salesmen.

You are not responsible for the size of the harvest. But you will be held accountable for two things: 1) to believe passionately in the power of the seed that is the *Word of God*. To never be ashamed of it, or doubt it will accomplish God's sovereign purpose; 2) to scatter it far and wide. Verse five says, "A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering his seed..." But there are a lot of people who hold on to their seed. Archeologists recently uncovered a 4,000-year-old mummy in Egypt. Though this ancient corpse was in a state of decay, they found the hands clutching seeds of wheat. They are the oldest seeds ever found. After 4,000 years those seeds could still be put in the ground and produce a harvest. Do you see the tragedy of this ancient Egyptian's selfishness? According to his religion, he took these seeds to plant in the underworld, so that he could eat for eternity. Of course, he was mistaken. Imagine if he had planted those seeds in the earth before he died. They would have produced wheat with more seed to be planted for a next generation, and then another. How much wheat would these seeds and their descendents have produced over 4,000 years? The math is mind-boggling. In 4,000 years millions of people could have been fed by those seeds clutched in the withered hands of a decomposing mummy. What a picture of so many people who hold on to their seed, never sharing the Word of God with others.

Contrast that with three traveling salesmen who met in a hotel in Wisconsin in 1899. They believed so passionately in the power of the Word that they thought if it were just placed in nightstands in hotel rooms, people might be saved. It was an overwhelming task. But they remembered how God had used Gideon and his small band to overwhelm a massive army by stepping out on faith. Their vision was to scatter seed and let God do the rest. They never would have dreamed of the harvest. Some 1.5 billion Bibles have been distributed by the Gideons since 1908. Last year 176,000 Gideons distributed 76.9 million Scriptures in hotels, motels, prisons, schools, military bases, medical facilities, and street corners in 187 countries of the world. In a hundred years millions of people have come to know the Lord, not through preachers (they aren't allowed in the Gideons) or evangelistic crusades. The Gideons believe that the pure power of the Word alone saves people. They know that the Word never returns empty. And, today, we have a chance to act on this parable by investing in their work.

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