

# OpenTheo

## September 16th: Zephaniah 1 & Matthew 13:1-23

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The coming Day of the Lord. The Parable of the Sower.

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## Transcript

Zephaniah chapter 1. The word of the Lord that came to Zephaniah the son of Qushai, son of Gedaliah, son of Amoriah, son of Hezekiah, in the days of Jeziel the son of Ammon, king of Judah. I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth, declares the Lord. I will sweep away man and beast.

I will sweep away the birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea and the rubble with the wicked. I will cut off mankind from the face of the earth, declares the Lord. I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

And I will cut off from this place the remnant of Baal and the name of the idolatrous priests along with the priests. Those who bow down on the roofs to the host of the heavens. Those who bow down and swear to the Lord and yet swear by Milcom.

Those who have turned back from following the Lord, who do not seek the Lord or inquire of him. Be silent before the Lord God. For the day of the Lord is near.

The Lord has prepared a sacrifice and consecrated his guests. And on the day of the

Lord's sacrifice, I will punish the officials and the king's sons and all who array themselves in foreign attire. On that day, I will punish everyone who leaps over the threshold and those who fill their master's house with violence and fraud.

On that day, declares the Lord, a cry will be heard from the fish gate, a wail from the second quarter, a loud crash from the hills. Wail, O inhabitants of the mortar, for all the traders are no more. All who weigh out silver are cut off.

At that time, I will search Jerusalem with lamps and I will punish the men who are complacent. Those who say in their hearts, the Lord will not do good nor will he do ill. Their goods shall be plundered and their houses laid waste.

Though they build houses, they shall not inhabit them. Though they plant vineyards, they shall not drink wine from them. The great day of the Lord is near, near and hastening fast.

The sound of the day of the Lord is bitter. The mighty man cries aloud there. A day of wrath is that day, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the lofty battlements.

I will bring distress on mankind so that they shall walk like the blind because they have sinned against the Lord. Their blood shall be poured out like dust and their flesh like dung. Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them on the day of the wrath of the Lord.

In the fire of his jealousy, all the earth shall be consumed for a full and sudden end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth. A prominent uniting theme of the Book of the Twelve is the Day of the Lord and this theme arguably arrives at one of its most pronounced expressions in the Book of Zephaniah, the ninth prophet of the Book of the Twelve, after Habakkuk and prior to Haggai. Like Hosea, Amos and Micah before it, Zephaniah is introduced to us with the king during whose reign the prophet ministered.

The Book of Haggai is set after the return to the land, while Habakkuk was likely written in the final decade of the 7th century BC during the reign of Jehoiakim. If this dating of Habakkuk is correct, then the Book of Zephaniah must be dated prior to its predecessor during the reign of Josiah. Josiah was a godly reforming king who succeeded his wicked father Ammon upon the throne at the tender age of eight after his father's assassination.

Josiah ruled for 31 years from around 640 to 609 BC. His reforms, which began during his teens, were designed to bring Judah back into conformity with the law. During his lengthy reign of over 50 years, Josiah's grandfather Manasseh had reversed the reforms of Josiah's great-grandfather Hezekiah.

Manasseh had been peculiarly wicked, leading Judah into idolatrous practices, extending

the worship of Baal and Asherah and of the celestial bodies, and participating in the worship of Molech. Despite the repentance of Manasseh towards the end of his life mentioned in the Book of Chronicles, the legacy of Manasseh's wickedness and the idolatry and sin that had become entrenched in Judah during his reign would prove devastating for the people, and despite the zealous reforming efforts of his grandson, would end up spelling doom for the entire nation. In Jeremiah chapter 15 verse 4 for instance, the Lord declares that the judgment to fall upon the nation through the Babylonian captivity was because of what Manasseh the son of Hezekiah, king of Judah, did in Jerusalem.

Second Kings chapter 24 verses 3-4 make a similar claim concerning the destruction of Judah at the hands of the Babylonians and others. And also for the innocent blood that he had shed, for he filled Jerusalem with innocent blood and the Lord would not pardon. The writing then was already on the wall.

While Josiah's reforming program brought Judah a temporary reprieve, it was not sufficient to arrest or to reverse the course of the nation. The nation was careening towards oblivion through its wickedness and idolatry. Second Kings chapter 23 verses 25-27 speak of Josiah.

Who turned to the Lord with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses, nor did any like him arise after him. Still, the Lord did not turn from the burning of his great wrath, by which his anger was kindled against Judah, because of all the provocations with which Manasseh had provoked him. And the Lord said, I will remove Judah also out of my sight, as I have removed Israel, and I will cast off this city that I have chosen, Jerusalem, and the house of which I said, My name shall be there.

During Josiah's reign Assyria was in decline and was in free fall during his final years. The dramatic cutting back of Assyrian power freed Josiah and Judah from their thrall and the pull that this had represented towards idolatry, as Judah had been a vassal of Assyria. This is important background for considering the reforms of Josiah's reign.

In the latter years of Josiah's reign Babylon's power was rising. They would soon come to dominate the entire region. Zephaniah speaks into the context of religious syncretism and paganism that Josiah's reforms were designed to address.

In his message we can see something of the prophetic impetus to reform that accompanied the priestly work of Hilkiah and the royal work of Josiah. Likely Zephaniah was one of the prophets mentioned in 2 Kings 23 verse 2 who accompanied King Josiah and the priests in the renewing of the covenant in the house of the Lord. Zephaniah was likely also a contemporary of Nahum who prophesied the downfall of Nineveh.

Nahum foretold the downfall of Nineveh and Habakkuk addressed the rise of Babylon.

Zephaniah also deals with the radical political changes of this historical juncture. But within his prophecy the desolation of the entire region and of Judah and Jerusalem is more pronounced and prominent.

While likely written prior to Habakkuk, its prophetic subject matter might make its later placement in the Book of the Twelve fitting. Zephaniah's place among and unity with the prophets is underlined by the extensive commonality between the language and themes of Zephaniah and those of other prophets. The superscription of the book introduces it as the word of the Lord that came to Zephaniah.

Zephaniah is given a surprisingly extensive genealogy going back to his great great grandfather, Thomas Rennes remarks upon the speculations of some commentators that what seems to be Zephaniah's father's name, Qushai, was either a statement of Zephaniah's own Qushaid origin or a name that Zephaniah's father received on account of his, and that the more extended genealogy might be intended to highlight Zephaniah's Israelite ancestry, which might not be immediately obvious from his darker skin, that is if we take the Qushan view to be the region of southern Sudan. These are possibilities but tenuous ones, so we shouldn't rest too much upon them one way or another. Another possibility, again highly speculative, is that Zephaniah's great great grandfather Hezekiah was King Hezekiah, and that the genealogy is traced back to him because of his royal significance in reforming work.

Rennes suggests that the reference to the name Hezekiah could be taken as a reminder of the reforms of that earlier king, whether or not Zephaniah's great great grandfather was King Hezekiah. In the verses that follow, Zephaniah announces the destruction that is about to come upon the earth. Adel Belin remarks upon themes of de-creation at the beginning of Zephaniah and the way that they draw upon Genesis chapters 1-11, both as a reversal of the creation work of the Lord in Genesis chapters 1-2, and also as a new general cataclysm about to devastate the region, akin to a new flood.

The language of verse 2 in particular evokes the extinction of all life in the flood of Noah's day. Later parts of the book explore themes of Babel. The picture of comprehensive annihilation first announced in verse 2 is filled out in the verses that follow.

Some have seen a reversal of the days of creation in verse 3. In sweeping away man and beast, the Lord is reversing day 6 of creation. In sweeping away the birds and the fish, he is reversing day 5. The next element of the verse is variously translated, but Rennes opts for, that which causes the wicked to stumble, which might be a possible reference to the sun, moon and stars, the astral bodies that the wicked were worshipping, the creatures of day 4. This allusion to the filling days of creation in reverse order is tentative but suggestive. However, there are other possible ways of understanding the expression, that which causes the wicked to stumble.

Perhaps it refers to the high places or to the false priests. While a more general judgement will fall upon the region, in verse 4 the Lord singles out Judah and Jerusalem. While reforms may already have begun, the Lord would crush the remnant of Baalism in the land, along with the worship of the celestial bodies and Milcom, a god of the Ammonites.

The people had broken the first three of the ten commandments, fundamentally perverting their worship and rejecting the Lord. From verse 5 it seems that the people's worship was syncretistic, combining elements of the worship of the Lord with the worship of false gods like Milcom. The theme of the day of the Lord is a thread running throughout the book of the twelve.

Joel chapter 1 verse 15, Alas for the day, for the day of the Lord is near, and as destruction from the Almighty it comes. Amos chapter 5 verses 18 to 20, Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord! Why would you have the day of the Lord? It is darkness and not light, as if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him, or went into the house and leaned his hand against the wall, and a serpent bit him. It is not the day of the Lord darkness and not light, and gloom with no brightness in it.

Obadiah verse 15, For the day of the Lord is near upon all the nations. As you have done, it shall be done to you. Your deeds shall return on your own head.

The day of the Lord is the day when the Lord takes decisive action, an appointed time when he comes on the scene to judge and to deliver. In verse 7 it is described as a sort of cultic occasion, with guests being summoned for a sacrificial feast. Who are the guests and what is the sacrificial victim? The startling reality is that the invitees seem to be the nations, and the sacrificial victim is Jerusalem.

The nations are coming to feast on the flesh of the wicked nation of Judah. At this time of judgment, the judgment will fall particularly upon the leaders of the people, the officials, the members of the royal household, and those who array themselves in foreign attire. The reference to foreign dress might be a reference to the extravagance of the dress of the rich.

More likely, however, it refers to the cultural appropriation of the behaviours, attitudes and forms of worship of other peoples and nations of the region. A common problem throughout the history of Israel and Judah was their adoption of the ways of the foreign nations, particularly among the elite, their intermarriage, cultural appropriation and the adoption of foreign gods. Verse 9 presents a number of questions for the interpreter.

What does it mean to leap over the threshold? What building is in view here? Whose is the master's house? Over history many commentators have related this to the superstitious practice mentioned in 1 Samuel 5, verse 5, where the priests of Dagon would not step on the threshold after Dagon had been humiliated there. Some then

suggest that this is an adoption of the pagan practice from the Philistines that is then practiced in the temple. The hopping or leaping over the threshold might not, however, be a reference to a particular superstitious practice.

It might merely refer to the careless self-confidence with which people crossed the threshold in question. What is the threshold in question? Is it the threshold of the temple? Many argue that it is. It is not, however, clear that the expression their master's house refers to the house of the Lord.

It might refer to the house of the king or to other masters. Renz raises the possibility that this refers to the servants of the various great houses of the land, to those who served in the palace, but also to those who served the elite of the land and their complicity with violence, oppression and injustice. The verses that follow describe the process by which the judgment would come upon Jerusalem.

A commotion would be heard from the fish gate as invaders entered the north of the city. Following that, shouting from the second quarter as another part of the city fell. Soon wailing would be heard from the mortar, presumably a place of trade and commerce.

The life of the city is being extinguished. All of the people who had lived as practical atheists, not believing that the Lord would act in their situation, would be hunted down by the Lord, the Lord searching them out with lamps and punishing them. They would all suffer the curse of futility, something that we also see in Micah 6.15. You shall sow but not reap.

You shall tread olives but not anoint yourselves with oil. You shall tread grapes but not drink wine. Also it is a great curse of the covenant.

In Deuteronomy 28.38-41. You shall carry much seed into the field and shall gather in little, for the locusts shall consume it. You shall plant vineyards and dress them. But you shall neither drink of the wine nor gather the grapes, for the worms shall eat them.

You shall have olive trees throughout all your territory, but you shall not anoint yourself with the oil, for your olives shall drop off. You shall father sons and daughters, but they shall not be yours, for they shall go into captivity. The concluding verses of the chapter give a powerful and dramatic presentation of the coming day of the Lord, expressing the urgency of the rapidly approaching day with great literary artistry.

Repetition of the term day is used for rhetorical effect. There is an agglomeration of dramatic descriptions. We are told of the threatening sound of its approach, the shouting of the warrior for instance.

The character of the day is described in verse 15. We might here recall the Theophany of Sinai. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled

greatly.

And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. The language here combines theophanic imagery associated with the Lord's war chariot to do battle against his foes, and also the theophanic imagery associated with covenant assembly and the founding of the covenant that we have in Sinai. Continuing themes of decreation, mankind will be plunged into darkness, walking around like the blind.

As they have rejected the light of the Lord's truth, this is a fitting judgement for their sin. Their blood will be poured out like dust, they return to the dust. Another image of decreation.

The same is true of comparing their flesh with dung. All of the things that they had put their trust in, their silver and their gold, would prove to be of no avail on the day of the Lord's judgement. The blow of the Lord's judgement would be sudden and decisive, the whole earth consumed by the fire of his jealousy.

A question to consider. Considering the various elements of teaching in the book of the twelve to this point concerning the day of the Lord, how might we draw a bigger and more comprehensive picture of what the day of the Lord involves? How might this account of the day of the Lord speak beyond the immediate circumstance of the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon to relate to other and greater judgements yet to come? Matthew chapter 13 verses 1 to 23. That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea.

And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things and parables, saying, A sower went out to sow.

And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched, and since they had no root, they withered away.

Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear.

Then the disciples came and said to him, Why do you speak to them in parables? And he answered them, To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.

This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing

they do not hear, nor do they understand. Indeed in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says, You will indeed hear, but never understand. You will indeed see, but never perceive.

For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed. Lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them. But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.

For truly I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it. Hear then the parable of the sower. 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. 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. 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.

As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word, and understands. He indeed bears fruit, and yields in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty. At the beginning of Matthew 13, Jesus leaves the house and sits down beside the sea. At this point a crowd is gathered, or more literally, synagogued to Jesus, and Jesus goes out into a boat, sits down, and teaches from there while the crowd is on the beach.

The setting here is probably significant. In the Gospels, the sea plays an important symbolic role. It's associated with the realm of the Gentiles and the world beyond Israel, and a boat is a part of the land taken out to sea.

Maybe we're supposed to pay attention to this particular detail that's mentioned in other Gospels as well. Jesus teaches the people in parables, and many people are unclear about the sort of thing that parables are. Many believe that they are illustrations, something that helps understanding and maybe presents a particular concept in a more vivid form.

Others see them as moral fables with some timeless lesson. But neither of these things are correct. The parables are parables of the Kingdom of God, something that is dawning in history at a critical moment.

And they're things that explain and disclose, but they're also things that bring about changes. Something new is happening in history, and the parables disclose this. The



parables themselves are a means by which the Kingdom is simultaneously revealed and concealed.

The parables are riddles that expose the mystery of the Kingdom to those with the eyes to see and the ears to hear, but they're also things that conceal them to those who do not. Great mysteries are being revealed to those who are able to perceive, and those who have hard hearts and dull ears are unable to see anything. The parable closes it off to them.

And so they're performing this double function. At the same time they're opening things up to some people and they're closing things off to others. We find examples of parables at a few points in the Old Testament.

They can function as riddles or prophetic messages. And here they let people in on the secret of the Kingdom of God, of what God is doing in Israel's history at this time. They take familiar stories and patterns and images from the Old Testament and reorder them often, yielding greater illumination but also sometimes surprising epiphanies and shocks.

This is not the way that people were expecting the story to go. While many think that the parable of the sower is obvious, Jesus himself explains it, it isn't necessarily so. There's more going on here, and it pays to be attentive to the details.

For many it's a timeless pattern of hearing and the relationship between hearing the word and being saved. It's an illustration of our doctrines of salvation, maybe helping us to understand the doctrine of regeneration and its relationship with the word of God. But while those doctrines may be true in their own place, I don't believe that that's primarily what's taking place here.

The primary place to go for understanding is the Old Testament itself. That's where we first find parables. It's where we find much of the imagery of the parables.

And if we pay attention to Old Testament prophecy and wisdom literature, many of these things will be a bit more apparent to us than they would be otherwise. The seed, I believe, is the word of God that re-establishes the people after exile. In the book of Isaiah chapter 55 verses 10 to 13 we read, and the same words are found in the book of Jeremiah chapter 31 verse 27 and 28.

Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of man and the seed of beast. And it shall come to pass that as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy and bring harm, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, declares the Lord. God is sowing the word that will restore his people.

But it isn't being properly received. Indeed, much of the seed will be wasted and remain in its exile-like conditions. And the telling of the parable has something of the effect that

it is describing.

Those who recognise its meaning can perceive that God is finally bringing about the fulfilment of his promises in Christ. He is sowing his word, he is restoring his people. But the climax of the story won't necessarily look the way that people expected it to.

In the climax, Jesus experiences the negative responses that previous prophets had received, not just the positive response of fruitfulness expected. You have both of those things alongside each other. We find the imagery of failed ground elsewhere in the New Testament, for instance in Hebrews chapter 6 verses 7 and 8, for land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God.

But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned. In that context, I believe he's referring to the Israelites who rejected the word of God, which is the same thing as Christ is referring to. These are people that had received all the blessings, had received the sowing of the word of God, and yet had not produced fruit.

They had failed in that respect, and were being prepared for being burned as a result. They were suffering judgement in that generation. The same imagery of sower and seed is found elsewhere in literature of the same sort of period.

We find it in 4 Ezra, for instance, chapter 8, 41 following. For just as the farmer sows many seeds in the ground, and plants a multitude of seedlings, and yet not all that have been sown will come up in due season, and not all that were planted will take root, so also those who have been sown in the world will not all be saved. And then 4 Ezra 9, 30 following.

Hear me, O Israel, for I sow my law in you, and it shall bring forth fruit in you, and you shall be glorified through it forever. But though our ancestors received the law, they did not keep it, and did not observe the statutes. Yet the fruit of the law did not perish, for it could not, because it was yours.

Yet those who received it perished, because they did not keep what had been sown in them. Jesus seems to use the imagery of the seed and the sower in a very similar way. The parable of the sower is especially important because, in many respects, it is the parable about parables.

It is in the context of this parable that Jesus teaches concerning his use of parables more generally. It is also arguably the first of the parables, and like many of the other parables, it is a parable about growth. We will find it very difficult to understand the parable of the sower unless we see it against the backdrop of the verses that Jesus quotes from Isaiah chapter 6. The point of Jesus' use of Isaiah chapter 6 is not just to

explain non-response, but to provoke faithful response.

Jesus is giving this word of judgement that Isaiah has at the beginning of his ministry to provoke people who hear that not to be like that. Jesus draws a strong comparison between his ministry and that of Isaiah, and this is a comparison that is quite pronounced in a number of the Gospels. For instance, it is developed all the way through Luke, leading up to the climax of Acts chapter 28, where that verse is brought forward again.

In verses 25 to 28, the Holy Spirit was right in saying to your fathers through Isaiah the prophet, go to this people and say, you will indeed hear, but never understand, and you will indeed see, but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I will heal them. Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles.

They will listen. This is the very end of the book of Acts. It's a programmatic statement for Acts and for the book of Luke.

It helps to address the question with which the book of Acts begins. Are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel at this time? As a more general principle of interpretation, it's important when we hear an Old Testament passage quoted, referenced or alluded to, to consider the context that it originally comes from. The latter part of Isaiah chapter 6 is all about hearing and not hearing, and it ends on a key note about the remnant as the holy seed.

It's by God's sowing of his word and the hearing of that word that the promised remnant is planted, and Isaiah brings those themes together. And we won't understand the melody as it were of Matthew chapter 13 unless we hear it alongside the harmony of Isaiah chapter 6. Those two things played together bring to life what's taking place here. The verses after the verses Jesus quotes read, Then I said, How long, O Lord? And he said, Until cities lie waste without inhabitants and houses without people, and the land is a desolate waste.

And the Lord removes people far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land. And though a tenth remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump.

So Jesus is comparing his ministry to previous ministries of prophets such as Isaiah, but he's also presenting himself as the one who is sowing the seed of the restoration, the seed of the remnant that will restore God's people as the prophets had all promised. In Hosea chapter 2 verse 21 to 23 for instance we read, And in that day I will answer, declares the Lord, I will answer the heavens, and they shall answer the earth, and the

earth shall answer the grain, the wine, and the oil, and they shall answer Jezreel, literally, God will sow, and I will sow her for myself in the land, and I will have mercy on no mercy, and I will say to not my people, You are my people, and he shall say, You are my God. This is the restoration that was promised and it happens as God sows a new people.

Jesus' statement to his disciples in verses 16 and 17 make clear that this is something happening at the fullness of time. It's not just a timeless message about how people respond or don't respond to the word of God. Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear, for truly I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

But now in the fullness of time God is restoring his people by sowing his word. He's speaking and in his speech he is restoring his word. The parable is, as I've said, a parable about parables, a parable about the teaching of the kingdom more generally.

It's a statement of purpose. The promised kingdom of God is not, as many kingdoms are, a kingdom of military might and power, a kingdom of political intrigue and skill. It's a kingdom of the word.

It's a kingdom formed by the speaking of God to his people, a word that gives life. It's a kingdom calling for wise and transformed perspectives, people changing the way that they see the world, God's action within it and their place within it. And it's working is not immediately obvious.

It's the sowing of a seed, a seed of a word, and that word finding root or not finding root, and the way that it responds or doesn't respond. And that is how the work of the kingdom is taking place. This is not what we would usually think of as a kingdom.

But here Christ is describing a kingdom that does not match our expectations, that surprises us. And this fundamental surprise prepares us for much that will follow. Jesus' interpretation of the parable, with which our passage ends, highlights different problems behind the non-reception of the seed.

Satan can stop people's understanding. This is the condition that Isaiah describes, people whose hearts have become hard. They can't hear with their ears or see with their eyes.

They've become dulled in their perception. For other people, they fail to persevere through testing. They face the hard situation of being pushed to the limit and they realise that they're going to be ostracised, they're going to lose their livelihoods, they're going to be pursued or maybe their lives will be taken.

And faced with those prospects, they give up. They do not persevere through the testing.

For others, it's being led astray by the concerns of the present age.

The deceitfulness of riches is a very powerful way of describing how riches can operate. Jesus has talked about riches elsewhere in the Sermon on the Mount, for instance, and spoken about how important it is to relate to riches well if we are going to enter the kingdom of God. Reading this parable in its proper context is incredibly important.

It's important to see that Christ is declaring something that's happening in the fullness of time through his ministry. God is establishing a new people and he's establishing this new people by his word. And there are all these obstacles to receiving this word, this word of restoration.

It can be seen in the way that Satan will dull people's understanding or snatch the word away from their hearts. It can be seen in the way that the cares and concerns of the world, the wealth that we have and the way that we become preoccupied with it, the way in which we can face persecution and just not stand up to it. All of these things are obstacles and so people are forearmed against these dangers.

This word that Jesus is giving here is part of the sowing that it describes. The parable of the sower is itself a sowing of the word in the hearts of people so that they will respond as they ought, as they see the different ways that they could respond in an inappropriate way. They are being called to be those who bring forth fruit.

Again, the distinction is not found in the reception of the word itself. Some ground receives the word and yet does not produce proper fruit. The distinguishing feature of the proper reception is the bringing forth of fruit.

There is something that must be transformed in people's lives. It must be something that reveals this new character of the kingdom that has been sown in their hearts, in their lives, in their communities. A question to consider.

Parables are, as it were, riddles of the kingdom and throughout this particular passage there is an emphasis upon hearing and understanding. We have this repeated expression, for instance, he who has ears let him hear, blessed are your ears for they hear. And then hear the parable of the sower.

And then Jesus' conclusion of the interpretation, as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. This emphasis upon hearing is not just found in Jesus' words, it's also seen in the words of Isaiah the prophet. Taking this great emphasis upon hearing that is at the very beginning of Jesus' teaching in these parables, how might our more typical understandings of hearing be challenged and changed by what Jesus is teaching concerning hearing here?