The Rocks

March 13th, 2022

Once when I was in college, I was given some melon seeds. I planted them in a little soil and placed them in the window. Some days later, they sprouted, and I was excited to see them putting out bright, green tendrils. I looked forward to the time when I could transfer them to the rather large garden we had back then. I thought it would be wonderful to have honeydew melons growing right there in the backyard. Then examinations came, and I forgot about them. When I checked on them again, I was shocked. They had not had enough water and had been scorched by the sun. It was a sad thing to see them dried out and lifeless. Lifeless trees, dried out grass—these are signs I have seen on road trips through terrains plagued with drought. The inclement sun had burnt up the life in whatever was growing; there was not enough good soil and water to sustain them. In science fiction films, apocalyptic landscapes tend to feature dead trees, sandy wastes, scorched grass, and the burning sun. They are all powerful symbols of something ending, of a world ending. It is the same image that Jesus uses for apostasy in our parable: “Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away” (Mark 4:5-6). In his explanation later on, Jesus says: “And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy. But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away” (Mark 4:16-17). To lose your faith is, in a sense, an apocalypse. It is the end of your world.

The rocky soil speaks of our hearts when they are shallow and unable to withstand the pressures that can bear down on the life of faith. And this is a mystery. The human capacity for endurance is remarkable. Whether you consider mountain climbers, long-distance runners, circus performers, ballerinas, workaholics, people who endure poverty for decades in order to suddenly become rich through their savings and investments, people who will go through great physical or emotional pain to attain to some goal—there are countless stories of what people have been able to endure. The audience Jesus addressed had been enduring various forms of foreign domination for centuries with only some short interludes. They paid exorbitant taxes to the Romans, tithes to Jerusalem, and yearned for freedom. Some were rebels, willing to die in battle, be imprisoned, become galley slaves or be crucified for their causes. They were not soft. These were hardened survivors. And yet, even among them, there were many who would later not bear the thought of being persecuted for the name of Jesus. Simone Weil once wrote that during the Second World War, while she had witnessed people line up for hours for pathetic scraps of food, she had hardly ever seen anyone spend five minutes to help someone else. Humans are designed for endurance and for depth, but we often do not allow ourselves to be who we are. Jesus points to two things that result in our apostasy—a lack of depth and an inability to withstand the pressures of the world *on account of the word.* In other words, the very word that first brought joy becomes an embarrassment, an inconvenience, a source of trouble.

What makes us shallow? The rocks in our soil. The rocks are perhaps strongholds of the world in us—hard, impenetrable things we refuse to give up that reduce our capacity for good soil. What, then, is depth? In geometric terms, the answer is very simple. Depth is *more.* The world’s oldest and largest lake, Lake Baykal, has a volume of 23,615 km3 .The lake I visited as a child, Shikotsu, though still quite deep, only has a volume of 20 cubic kilometres. Harrison Lake is slightly bigger with a volume of 33 cubic kilometers. Great differences from Lake Baikal. A swimming pool may have one end that is about 2 or 3 ft. deep for children and another end that is 6ft. deep or more for adults. One can move around a bit more on the deep end; there is more water there. The question of depth in the spiritual life is a question of how much you want. When Elisha was called to follow Elijah, the old prophet asked the young man what he wanted: “Then Elijah said to him, ‘Stay here; for the Lord has sent me to the Jordan.’ But he said, ‘As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.’ So the two of them went on. Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground. When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, ‘Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you.’ Elisha said, ‘Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit.’ He responded, ‘You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not.’ As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. Elisha kept watching and crying out, ‘Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!’ But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces” (2 Kings 2:6-12). Not only would Elisha not abandon Elijah, he presumptuously asked for a double portion of his gift. Elisha wanted more. It is a kind of divine or holy presumption. And the gift was granted. If only we were that presumptuous today! If only we desired more and more and more from God. The sky is not even the limit. It is God of whom we speak—there are no limits. It reminds us of the saying of Jesus: “For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away” (Matthew 13:12). Jesus also chastised the scribes and Pharisees, saying: “There is no place in you for my word” (John 8:37). In that same discourse, Jesus distinguished between those who were from God and those were who were not from God: “Whoever is from God hears the words of God. The reason you do not hear them is that you are not from God” (John 8:47). I would assume from the aforesaid that the ones from God are the ones with room in their hearts from Jesus. The ones who want to listen. The ones who desire depth. The ones who bring their nothing to God become the ones from God who receive God. Depth begins with a poverty of spirit: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3). Blessed are the ones who want more, and more will be given them.

Every year, I have to clean out the little shrubs, trees and flowers that get root-bound in their pots. I tried to prevent this from happening, but it’s not always possible to take care of all of them. They are strange to look at. They look like they have been wrapped in a golden maze, a cylindrical labyrinth of death going nowhere. To lack depth is to lack movement and growth. There is nowhere to go, no way to move forward. In the gospels, we see Jesus constantly walking, constantly on the move. He walks to his death; he walks in his resurrection. Rarely will you come across a historical figure or character who is so busy—on the road, in homes, in the temples, in the synagogues, in the wayside grass. Jesus is there. The gospels are full of movement. The lame walk and the blind see. The poor rejoice. They have found a way forward, a way out of stagnation, a way out of spiritual death. After the ascension, this mode of life continues. The apostles are constantly moving. And even when they are in prison, the letters of the apostles are moving, traveling to the cities of the Mediterranean, sending out the light. The gospel is growth and movement. The blind who had lived stationary lives of begging get up and walk around. Blind Bartimaeus jumps up and follows Jesus (Mark 10:46-52). Our lives need to have a capacity for growth, a desire for growth, a place in our narratives where the roots can stretch out and wander to search for water and nutrients. For that is what roots are searching for. Much of what Christians consume today is not nutritious in the least. It may seem sophisticated and just, it may seem noble, but it is not nutritious. It is not a habit of seeking God, a habit of learning humbly from God, a habit of imbibing living waters (John 4), of consuming the food that is to do the Father’s will. It is empty food for shallow soil. Across the political and cultural spectrum, every kind of insanity has shone forth in all of its glory these days—but none of it has depth, and this lack of depth accounts for most of our divisions today. Already we are harvesting the discord and violence sown by the shallowness of our world.

And thus, when the sun burns, our plants shrivel up, bleach, dry out and die. There is no life left in them because they have been severed from Christ, apart from whom we can do nothing (John 15). That is the lifelessness of apostasy. What is the sun? Jesus says: “When trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away” (Mark 4:17). Trouble and persecution have always been a part of human history and always will be, as long as sin reigns in the world. There is a tyrant on the other side of the world who is shocked that there exist people who would rather suffer privation, terror and death than yield to his demands. And on our side of the world, there are many who are shocked that there are Christians who still want to live like Christians, believe like Christians and worship like Christians. In various subtle ways, these Christians are being softly persecuted. In the days to come, it might not be soft. They are not allowed to have a conscience, a traditional belief, or an appreciation of the miraculous. They are considered benighted and backwards. The most unbiblical things we espouse as a culture today all relate to convenience and narcissism. If they were inconvenient, we would not espouse them. We have a low tolerance for difficulty, inconvenience, embarrassment, troubles, or persecution. Jesus did not come to give us temporary convenience or comfort. Jesus came to give us eternal life and transformation into his likeness. Whenever we compromise with the world, whether in the name of being progressive or conservative, intellectual, just, compassionate, or sophisticated, we are immediately suggesting that God is not wise, just, compassionate or sophisticated like we are. Whenever we compromise with the world, we are saying that we would rather burn up and dry out than just endure with Jesus, the one who endured the cross for us. Whenever we compromise with the world, we have said that there is something more precious than Jesus, more precious than his word, more precious than the gift of eternal life with God. It is then that we say we cherish our rocks rather than our soil; that we have rejoiced in the comfortable paralysis of shallowness; that our roots have nothing to search for and no nutrients to retrieve for us.

When I was a child, I watched a film titled *If I Perish;* it is about Esther Ahn Kim, a Korean woman who suffered under the fascist regime of the Empire of Japan during the Second World War. It is a beautiful story, but it is full of pain. Esther was a school teacher living in Korea under Japanese occupation. The Japanese warlords had set up a shrine on a mountain and commanded the locals to worship there in a scenario not unlike what you read about in Revelation. Many Christians had agreed that it was all right to bow to the images, even of the Emperor, as long as they remained faithful in their heart. Esther Ahn Kim would not do that. As we read in one biographical article: “Esther knew what she would do. Even though so many other Christians had decided that outwardly bowing to the idol was acceptable as long as they continued to worship Christ in their hearts, Esther could make no such compromise. She would not bow to any other but the one true God. Defying the Japanese warlords would most likely mean torture and imprisonment, but Esther decided that she would not live her youthful life for herself. She would offer it fully to her Prince, Jesus Christ. She said a silent prayer to Him. *Today on the mountain, before the large crowd, I will proclaim that there is no other god but You*, she declared…On the long walk back to the school, Esther continued her dialogue with God. *I have done what I should have done*, she told Him. *Now, I commit the rest to You. I died today on that mountain—now it is only You who lives through me. I leave everything in Your hands*” (<https://www.reviveourhearts.com/blog/esther-ahn-kim-power-suffering-well-christ/>). Everyone else bowed to the image—but not Esther. She would not bow to the world; she would not serve it. She was imprisoned for six years and subjected to all kinds of horrors, but she survived the war and went on to become a renowned lecturer. While in prison, she ministered to other women, sharing the gospel and giving people hope. She had depth. The sun did not scorch her; it made her grow. And it helped others grow. And it was because she wanted more. She wanted Jesus more than anything else—more than silver or gold, more than houses or land, more than worldly applause or worldwide fame, more than anything this world offers today.