

Good Soil

Jesus doesn't ask us for bigger faith; he asks where our faith is planted, because a seed in a jar does nothing and the same seed in good soil takes over.

FROM THE BOOK: CHAPTER 7

BEFORE YOU MEET

- Read Chapter 7 of *The Weight of God* ("Good Soil"). The farm stories at the start and the section on the mustard seed in the cupboard are the heart of it.
- Read Matthew 17:14–20 (and glance at Matthew 10:1, where Jesus first gives the disciples authority over unclean spirits).
- Optional but worth it: bring a small jar of mustard seeds (from the spice aisle) and, if you can, a pot of soil. Hold up the jar during the talk.
- Bring Bibles, pens and a printed participant sheet for each person.
- Time plan for 75 minutes: 5 arrive and settle, 10 open, 15 the idea, 10 read together, 25 talk, 5 this week, 5 pray.

OPEN

10 min

What's the best or worst thing you've ever tried to grow? Anything counts: tomatoes, a lemon tree, a pot plant you forgot to water, a sourdough starter.

THE IDEA

15 min

The author of *The Weight of God* is a farmer. He says the leaves on a plant are its mood ring: they curl in the heat and perk up after a feed, reacting to whatever happened this week. The roots tell you more. But the real secret of farming is the most boring thing of all: soil. "What we plant things into is more important than what we plant."

At the top of his driveway is one sad tree. Same sun, same water, same care as its neighbours, and it just won't thrive. It turns out a line of gum trees nearby once spread over that spot, and eucalyptus roots reach far underground, drinking up the water and giving off compounds that hold back other plants. Ten metres down the hill, everything flourishes. Same plant, different soil, different result.

Now to Matthew 17. A father brings his son, who is suffering terribly, to the disciples. They try to drive out the demon, and nothing happens. This shouldn't be. Jesus had already given them that authority, and they'd done it before. They knew the procedure.

Jesus arrives, frees the boy, and the disciples ask him privately: why couldn't we? His answer uses a Greek word, *oligopistian*, that the book says appears nowhere in Greek writing before Matthew's Gospel. It's usually translated "little faith". Then, in the same breath, Jesus says faith like a mustard seed, the tiniest seed they knew, can move a mountain.

So which is it? Is small faith the problem, or is small faith enough?

New Testament scholars D.A. Carson and R.T. France help here. The problem wasn't the size of the disciples' faith but its quality. They had started treating their authority like a technique that works because it worked last time, the way a tradie trusts his tools. Their weight had slid off Jesus and onto their own track record and method.

And mustard, as any farmer knows, is not polite. A seed a millimetre or two across can grow taller than a person and take over a garden; Jewish law later banned planting it in gardens for exactly that reason. Jesus isn't praising tininess. He's describing a seed with explosive character.

The author has a jar of mustard seeds in his kitchen cupboard, sitting between the cumin and the garlic. They're no threat to anyone. Drop a handful into good soil, though, and within a season they'd take over. Same seeds. One difference. "Soil. Someone has to plant them in soil."

The soil, in this story, is Jesus himself. Not our technique. Not our track record. Him.

READ TOGETHER

10 min

- **Matthew 17:14–20.** Notice the two different diagnoses: Jesus calls the crowd unbelieving (in Greek, without faith at all), but tells his own disciples their faith is little or poor. Some English translations say faith "as small as" a mustard seed; the Greek simply says "like" a mustard seed, a comparison of character rather than size.

- 1 The author says leaves are a plant's mood ring, but soil is what really matters. In everyday life, what's something that looks impressive on the surface but tells you very little about what's underneath?

LEADER NOTE *Keep this light and broad (houses, cars, social media, job titles). It sets up the idea that the visible stuff isn't the foundation.*

- 2 The disciples had done this before, and it had worked. Why might past success make it easier to lean on the method rather than on the Person?

LEADER NOTE *Listen for examples from work, parenting or sport. The drift is usually gradual and unnoticed, which is part of the point.*

- 3 Jesus says the issue isn't how much faith you have but where it's planted. How does that land if you've ever been told, or told yourself, that you just need more faith?

LEADER NOTE *This can be a relief for some and a puzzle for others. Let both reactions stand; you don't need to resolve every question tonight.*

- 4 Prayer, Bible reading, serving, coming to church, knowing the right words: these are good things. When might a good habit quietly become the soil, the thing we're actually relying on?

LEADER NOTE *Keep this personal rather than critical of other people or other churches. The question is about our own hearts, not anyone else's practices.*

- 5 Where is your faith planted right now: in technique or in the Person? Is there any hard, compacted ground in your life that might need breaking up first?

LEADER NOTE *Chapter 7 links breaking up the soil with metanoia, the New Testament word for repentance, meaning a turning rather than a feeling of guilt. Offer pairs for this one if the group is quiet.*

THIS WEEK

5 min

Pick one regular part of your faith life: prayer, reading the Bible, serving, Sunday church. Each time you do it this week, pause for a moment first and ask: am I leaning on this, or on him? If it helps, carry a mustard seed (or any small seed) in your pocket or wallet as a reminder.

PRAY

5 min

Thank Jesus that he is the good soil, and that we don't have to manufacture a bigger faith. Pray honestly about the places where our weight has slid onto our own track record or technique. Ask him to break up any hard ground, and to make the small, real faith in the room take root in him.