

Matthew 13:4

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And when he sowed, some seeds fell by the way side, and the fowls came and devoured them up:

Analysis

'And when he sowed, some seeds fell by the way side, and the fowls came and devoured them up.' Jesus begins the Parable of the Sower, describing first response-type to gospel: the path hearers. The 'way side' (τὴν ὁδόν/tēn hodon) refers to hardened footpath through or beside the field—compacted soil where seed cannot penetrate. Birds immediately 'devoured' (κατέφαγεν/katephagen) the seed. Jesus explains (v.19): this represents those who hear kingdom word but don't understand; Satan immediately removes what was sown. The image is sobering: some hear gospel without any penetration—like seed bouncing off concrete. Reformed theology sees this describing unregenerate hearts in hardened unbelief (Hebrews 3:15). The problem isn't seed (Word is powerful—Hebrews 4:12) but soil condition. Hardness can result from repeated exposure without response, love of sin, pride, or previous rejection of truth. The parable warns against assuming mere hearing guarantees spiritual benefit. Spiritual receptivity—soft, prepared heart—is essential.

Historical Context

Palestinian farmers sowed seed by hand-broadcasting, walking through fields scattering grain. Inevitably, some fell on footpaths traversing fields. These paths became hard-packed from constant traffic—soil compacted, impenetrable. Seeds landing there remained surface-level, easily visible to birds that quickly ate them. Jesus's agricultural illustration would have been immediately recognized by His audience—they'd seen this countless times. The spiritual application addressed

common experience: thousands heard Jesus teach, yet many showed no lasting response. The parable explained this phenomenon: hearing alone doesn't guarantee fruit. Heart condition determines response. In church history, this pattern repeats: some hear gospel repeatedly—in Christian families, churches, schools—yet remain unmoved. The Word never penetrates; Satan removes it before any impact. This challenges both preachers (faithful proclamation required despite varied responses) and hearers (desperate need for heart receptivity). Modern Western Christianity particularly needs this warning: we're saturated with Bible teaching yet often produce little fruit.

Related Passages

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

Study Questions

1. What causes hearts to become 'hardened path' impervious to God's Word—and how can hardness be softened?
2. How do you cultivate receptivity to Scripture rather than letting it bounce off hardened, distracted heart?
3. What role does Satan play in preventing gospel penetration, and how can believers resist his seed-snatching work?

Interlinear Text

καὶ	ἐν	τῷ	σπείρειν	αὐτά	αἱ	μὲν	ἔπεσεν	παρὰ	τὴν
And	when	G3588	sowed	he	some	G3303	seeds fell	by	G3588
G2532	G1722		G4687	G846	G3739		G4098	G3844	
όδον,	καὶ	ἥλθεν	τὰ	πετεινὰ	καὶ	κατέφαγεν	αὐτά		
G3598	And	came	G3588	the fowls	And	devoured	he		
G2532	G2064		G4071	G2532	G2719		G846		

