

Faith Like a Mustard Seed

by Els Van Hierden

Puffy, grey clouds of dust swirled underneath my feet as I walked across the newly seeded prairie soil. The sun beat down mercilessly on the crumbly, grey dirt. I bent down and picked up a handful of grey powder, and let it slip through my fingers. The little mustard seeds were nowhere to be seen. Opening my hand, I dropped the soil and brushed off my hands. Standing up from my crouched position, I rose, and faced the Rocky Mountains in the west. Chief Mountain, Montana's majestic landmark, held his faithful, but distant, watch over the prairie. I lifted my eyes to the brilliant blue sky.

"We need rain," I breathed, "but Lord, You have said that You are our faithful provider. I will not ask for rain. You are my heavenly Daddy. The crop is Yours and You can take care of it."

My husband and I had been in the hay business for far too long to pray for rain. We knew that when one farmer prayed for rain, the other farmer feverishly was trying to harvest his first cut alfalfa. No, I wouldn't pray for rain. I'd trust the Lord to take care of the crop.

Over the next few weeks a little rain fell, just enough to germinate the seeds and sprout miniscule plants. A very hardy crop, mustard needs little moisture to grow, and is suitable for the harsh dry land conditions in Southern Alberta. "It's almost like a weed," my husband explained. "It's tough to kill." That was what we needed. Something tough to kill so we'd get a crop. A good crop. We needed it so badly.... After two years of no income and huge financial and business problems, we were ready for some success. Some money to pay our bills....

A month later the mustard plants had reached a height of about six inches, and began to flower.... Where was the tree that Jesus talked about in the Gospels? Tiny plants, that expected the worst, flowered early, hoping to produce seed before their demise.

"It's about to bolt," my brother-in-law told us. I didn't know what that meant, but looking at the dry soil and the sad little plants, I was about to bolt as well.

Then the rain came and bolt it did. Within a few weeks the plants shot up to about a meter. Then more rain came. And more rain. And then some more. Lousy camping weather, but fantastic mustard weather. I thanked God for His provision. After all, the crop was His. He'd look after it. All I needed was faith like a mustard seed....

September hit hot and humid. Temperatures soared up to the mid-thirties. We broke all records. Alberta was hotter than Texas. Campers headed out of Lethbridge by mass exodus to catch up on camping. The mustard grew even more. We measured it at five-foot something, right up to my husband's chest.

"When can we harvest?" I asked. All the other farmers were cutting their canola or combining wheat. "It's too green. It needs to die." "How about straight-cutting it?" "The seed company

does not want us to." So we waited for the mustard to die. By the end of September it was still green. "We need frost," Edward said. "That will kill and dry it."

Soon his wish came true. October announced its arrival by a furious snow storm. For days, the snow and sleet pelted the area. My brother-in-law lost half his crop in a wind storm. The swaths simply blew away. But ours wasn't cut. It was safe. God was taking care of it. I trusted Him.

Thanksgiving Day (in October in Canada) arrived with a smile of sunshine. The turkey and potatoes reminded us of God's faithfulness throughout an extremely trying year. The Lord had taken care of us, protected us, brought us thus far, although the future was uncertain.

"How's the crop?" I asked my husband when he mentioned that he'd been at the ranch. His face fell. "Not good. The snow has broken all the tops off and it's shelling out. Half of it is probably gone already."

My heart sank with shock. I had not expected that. More setbacks!

October's dismal weather did not let up. For three weeks the rain and snow descended intermittently, pounding the seed pods off the stalks. It never dried up enough to get close to a harvest. Discouragement filled my heart: we needed that crop so badly, and now it looked like we were losing it.

Finally, during the last week of October, the field was dry. I drove to the ranch and walked among the dry, brittle stalks of mustard. Little seeds littered the ground, but lots remained on the stalks. More than I had expected. Encouraged, we waited for the combine to arrive.

Friday afternoon, October 23, the equipment arrived. "They'll be combining this afternoon," my husband announced. But by the next morning it was supposed to be raining again. There wasn't much time. When my friend and I arrived at the field, the combine was standing still. Anxiety gripped my heart. Was it broken down? We only had a few hours until evening fell.

"Too wet," the farmer explained as he climbed on top of the huge, green machine. "We can't combine. The seed has too much moisture."

"How's the crop?" I asked, pointing to the ground.

"Not good. It's falling off," he answered, pointing to the loose pods on the ground. "It's has to be harvested soon. This wind is blowing a lot of seed off the stalks."

The ground underneath my feet was littered with pods and yellow mustard seeds. Bending down, I picked up a handful of broken pods. The strong west wind rattled the brittle pods like millions of crickets chirping in unison. I stood on the remains of tens of thousands of dollars of mustard seed.

My friend and I prayed for protection on the crop, that no more seed would fall to the ground. We prayed for a speedy harvest, and for the rain to stay away. "Fifty thousand dollars, Lord," I

prayed. "We're believing for a crop of fifty-thousand dollars." That was conservative: there had at one point been a seventy-five thousand dollar crop on the field, but yet it was audacious: we'd probably lost at least half the crop already. The neighbors had commented that it was the best dry land mustard crop they'd ever seen, but now it was dwindling.

Friday evening I stood in front of my bathroom window and looked out. Storm clouds continued to gather in the distance. I opened the window and stood in the wind. "Be big, Lord," I prayed into the storm. "Be huge! You can halt the storm so we can combine." My Bible study by Beth Moore had encouraged me to pray big. Believe God to come through. Expect big things from God. Have faith. I felt faith rise in my heart. Usually torn between fear and faith, I knew faith was rising to the top. God would take care of the crop.

Saturday morning dawned wet and dreary. The rain had come. God had told me "no". I didn't feel discouraged. I'd believed. I'd had faith. I had received a "no" but still felt encouraged. Sunday was clear and sunny. No snow in the forecast. Perhaps we could soon combine.... My brother had told me that they had drying bins, so even if we had a high moisture crop, we could combine and bring it there to be dried. If only we'd known that the day before....

Monday morning I crawled out of bed, trundled to the bathroom window, and expectantly looked out. All I could see was a blur of white. Quickly, I grabbed my glasses and peered into the dark. A blinding snow storm, worse than anything we'd had this year, assaulted my emotions. The lawn was covered underneath a blanket of snow, several inches thick. The north wind howled furiously around the house. I could not even see the highway: we had a complete white-out. I staggered back in shock. How could this be? My husband joined the dismal scene in silence. Born and raised on the farm, we both knew that this was part of farming. Yet, it was hard to take.

"The crop won't be worth taking off anymore," Edward said. "It'll be all crushed under the snow now. This means crop failure." Usually the optimist, I knew this was a hard blow for my husband.

Tears slid down my cheeks. I felt crushed. Failed by my Lord, whom I had trusted so completely with the crop. Why this? Why now? We needed to pay the bills. There was no other money coming in anytime soon that we knew about. But I didn't want to fail in my faith, my walk with God. I prayed through the anger, submitted to the Lord, and repented of my confused emotions. Yet, the heaviness remained. Where was all the joy of falling in diverse trials? I didn't feel joy. I couldn't imagine feeling joy. I'd tried that for two years now as the trials continued to pound our finances and our family. I felt emptied, depleted.

The following day I had to pick up a horse past the ranch. As I drove by the land, I could see the combine sitting in a sea of white snow, forlorn and lonely. Tears flooded my eyes. Suddenly, Casting Crowns' "I'll praise You in the storm" song came on the speakers of my stereo. "Empty hands held high. Such small sacrifice.... But it's still raining. So I'll praise you in the storm, and I will lift my hands for You are Who You are, no matter where I am...." I wept for the lost crop, and my crushed belief that God would look after it, but I knew that God was God, and I did not

understand. I just had to trust Him in all my circumstances, even when He saw it best that all the seed was crushed to the ground. He had never failed me before. There had to be a greater purpose to be fulfilled, something that reached beyond the temporal and outward, to the internal and eternal. I wiped my tears and carried on, but the weight of broken hope remained.

On Tuesday morning, I woke up gloomy, somewhat angry even, an emotion I had not experienced for sometime in the context of disappointment with God's purposes. Why the crop? Why us? Why now? When would things turn around? I entered my "Face book" page. Suddenly, a chat box popped up from a friend. "How are you doing?" I dreaded to answer, but I had to be real. "All right," I texted back. "Only all right?" "The crop failed." And I am upset, laying here feeling sorry for myself. "Oh, that's too bad. I have a DVD for you. Do you have time to watch it?" "Yes, I'll make time." Actually, no, I want to keep feeling sorry for myself. I don't want to watch anything. But yes, this is from God, I know that, and I know I can't keep feeling this way. So when God sends something, I'll watch it. It has to be important. I'll make time.

The DVD by Beth Moore on the life of Esther was powerful. Destiny is born in the middle of great personal crisis. Esther had her own problems when Mordecai asked her to go to the king. She felt lost, forlorn, not needed anymore. Yet her destiny was born out of her adversity. "Who knows but that you have come to the throne for a time such as this?"

Who knew? Perhaps this huge personal crisis, of which the crop was a small part, was ushering in a much greater destiny for us. Perhaps our faith in God's unfailing faithfulness had to be built up so we could speak out. But how did this work to build my faith in God? How did shattered faith build greater faith, greater courage to step out boldly in prayer?

"Did you go see the crop?" I asked my husband.

He pointed to the heavy snow load. "What's there to see?"

Later on in the week, I drove by the ranch again. The snow had disappeared. The combine still stood on the field, like a lonely sentinel on guard. The sight encouraged me. The old farmer must have thought there might still be something to harvest.

"If God can pick corn off the ground after hail," my daughter Elise told me, referring to movie "Faith like potatoes", "then He can pick the seed off the ground."

Yes, He could. Of course He could. But it would have been easier to get it combined in the first place, it seemed to me.

On Thursday night we met with our old Romania mission trip team and Peter Mrazik, the missionary from Romania. I'd had a brave front all week: no tears, no outward emotions, but sitting with a close friend I began to cry and pour out my heart.

"I know this is going to make an awesome testimony some day," I told her, "but right now it hurts really badly. Why have we had to go through so many of these kinds of setbacks this past year? What is going on?"

We encouraged each other in the Lord, hugged, and cried. My emotions were like a volcano pouring out lava, and now that it was stirred, there was no end to it.

"God is good," she said to me as they were leaving.

"All the time," I answered. God was indeed good all the time. Crop or no crop. God's goodness was part of His character, his nature, and this had nothing to do with whether or not I received my request. God loved me with an everlasting love, and my circumstances did not alter that fact.

After everyone left, I sat alone in the living room, crying out to God. Why, Lord? Why all this pain? Not only that, but I'd been holding out to the hope that the Lord would deliver us out of the other seemingly impossible situation we were in, just like the crop. But with the failed crop, what surety did I have? Did faith just make us feel good to go through the situations, but with no real help out of the difficulties? What was God doing in all this? Was this all there was to life?

Grabbing my Bible, it fell open to Psalm 118. My eyes fell on verse 18. "I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the Lord has done. The Lord has chastened me severely, but He has not given me over to death."

The following morning, I felt a deep urge to go see the crop. On the way, I listened to a c.d. from Kathy Troccoli. She spoke on, "What do you want: Jesus or Barabbas?" Jesus of course, we all say. But then she asked, "What do you want more, Jesus or that new job? Jesus, or money? Jesus, or relationships? Is He really first in your life or do you worship idols?" I had pondered that question the whole week already: did I trust and love Jesus, or money, which was what the crop represented? Would I follow Jesus, even when all else failed? Would I live free without worry, knowing He's my source?

When I arrived at the field, I saw with a quick glance that the crop was now only about a foot high rather than over five feet tall. I quickly riveted my eyes on the road. I'd look at the crop when I got out of the vehicle, and not make my decision based on this. I parked, hastened into the field to take a closer look. The once tall crop had completely bent over and now lay flat on the ground. I examined the soil in between the plants: no new seeds were to be seen, just the old, black rotting pods. Amazed, I stood to my feet. A strong west wind blew over the field, yet the field was silent. The plants lay so low on the ground, bent over by the snow load, that the wind had no effect on them anymore. No new pods were being lost. I picked an arm full of plants to take home as my heart began to lift.

Farmer Ben drove up to the field, and got out of his red Dodge. "Still lots of crop here," he commented. "That snow was the best thing that could have happened to it. Laid it right flat so the wind couldn't damage it anymore."

My van had wings when I drove him to show Ed the plants. He was in the office visiting with our friend from Romania, Peter Mrazik, when I entered. "Did you talk to John?" I asked, referring to the foreman responsible for harvesting our field.

"No, why?" Ed looked up.

I laid the plants on the ground. "The crop is still there. It's ready to harvest. The snow didn't touch it, but protected it from the storm instead."

Over the next four days, October 31-November 3, we harvested. The weather held steadfast, but the combine did not. The gearbox was a constant threat, with several breakdowns. The combine picked up a lot of dirt because the crop was so close to the ground as well, so there was a lot of combine cleaning going on. Every time we thought they were done, they had several more hours to go. The yield over the last few days had been low. According to calculations, we'd end up with about two-thousand bushels, a far cry from the forty-five hundred bushels we had hoped for, but still much to be thankful for. Yet, I'd prayed for fifty-thousand dollars.... I calculated that we needed twenty-nine hundred bushels to make that figure. Would God answer that as well? Or perhaps not? Had I prayed too big?

Tuesday night, November 3rd, Ed woke me up at about eleven o'clock. "They're finished," he said. "They had another truckload full of seed. Tomorrow we'll know how much."

I woke up at 3:00 am that morning and began to write this story down, not knowing yet the final outcome. "I shall not die but live, and proclaim what the Lord has done." God in His sovereign will had chosen to give us a crop. But even if He had not, we would praise Him in the storm, recognizing that God's eternal purpose eclipsed our limited understanding. Of one thing we were assured, success or no success, God was at work in our hearts to refine us, to sanctify us. Even through the fire, He was with us.

The waters would not overflow us. The vast ocean of God's grace and love assured us of sustaining strength in time of need. Around ten-o'clock that morning, we got the final count: thirty-three hundred and five bushels. Fifty-six thousand dollars.

God is good. *All* the time. He is good not because the harvest came-in, He is good because that is who He is.

Good is an attribute of God. He cannot be anything but good - this is his nature. He works everything together for good. Hence, even if the harvest had not come-in, He is still good. In this situation, He worked an incredible good in my heart, which was a price gift. And in addition, He brought the harvest-in.