



## HOW DOES THE KINGDOM GROW?

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 Mark 4:26-34  
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We are at a critical juncture in our studies in the gospel of Mark. In the midst of fixed opposition to his message, Jesus has changed his method of teaching to parables. He has done so for two reasons. First, he knew that his announcement of the kingdom was dangerous, unwelcome, and subversive to the powers that be, whether they were the Romans, King Herod, or the Jewish zealots. The truth had to be disguised in parables lest the prophet lose his freedom of movement, perhaps even his life. This is why the parables are cryptic metaphors that are dense with meaning.

Elie Weisel is one of the great writers of this century. In his first book, *Night*, he explains how he learned this same mode of speech in the Jewish ghettos during the Holocaust. His book, a mere 109 pages, describes his experiences in Auschwitz and Buchenwald:

All my subsequent works are written in the same deliberately spare style as *Night*. It is the style of the chroniclers of the ghettos, where everything had to be said swiftly, in one breath. You never knew when the enemy might kick in the door, sweeping us away into nothingness. Every phrase was a testament. There was not time or reason for anything superfluous. Words must not be imprisoned or harnessed, not even in the silence of the page. And yet, it must be held tightly. If the violin is to sing, its strings must be stretched so tight as to risk breaking; slack, they are merely threads.<sup>1</sup>

The same could be said of the parables of Jesus. Every phrase is a testament, strung so tight as to make it resonate with emotion.

The second reason why Jesus taught in parables is that by shrouding the truth of the kingdom in a veil of secrecy, only those who gave their full attention to attaining the mystery would comprehend its message. As the truth of the parable was revealed, it became all the more precious to those who had worked to understand it. When truth is hard-won, passions are ignited and the flame of love fills the soul. In this way, the light of the parable was passed on to the world only by those who loved the Savior. Such is the dual nature of parables. They conceal truth from the enemy, but reveal it to lovers of the Savior. My short time in communist Romania, in 1988 and 1989, gave me a taste of this principle. The necessity of having to carefully veil the gospel in the presence of enemy eyes was the very thing that fostered an unquenchable love in those who longed for it. In Romania, I experienced a love from which I have yet to re-

cover.

The mysteries contained in these first parables were essential for the disciples to understand how the kingdom of God grew. Recall that these mysteries all center around the word "seed," which is used twelve times in this chapter. This kingdom would not be inaugurated through sword, politics, or ceremonial ritual, but with a farmer's bag of seed.

In his first parable, Jesus spoke of four different kinds of soil that were present in Israel. The seed which was sown was either snatched up by an enemy, scorched with no root, or choked out by worldly pleasures. But then there was the good soil, whose fertility would far outweigh the initial rejection of the other three. This good soil would bear fruit, thirty, sixty and one hundredfold.

In our text today, Jesus focuses on the good soil. Here he reveals the mystery behind the process of how it brings forth a harvest, in fulfillment of what Isaiah envisioned in the Messianic Age:

**"For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,  
 And do not return there without watering the earth,  
 And making it bear and sprout,  
 And furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater;  
 So shall My word be which goes forth from My mouth;  
 It shall not return to Me empty,  
 Without accomplishing what I desire,  
 And without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it." (Isa 55:10-11 NASB)**

### I. The parable of the man and the growing seed (4:26-29)

This parable, which reveals the mystery of spiritual growth, has very significant implications for how we carry out ministry and discipleship in the church.

**And He was saying, "The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil; and goes to bed at night and gets up by day [literally: sleeps and rises by night and by day], and the seed sprouts up and grows—how, he himself does not know. The soil produces crops by itself; first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head. But when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."**

## A. The ways of the seed imitate the ways of the man

There are two things to note in this parable. First, the intimate connection between the man and the seed, in which the life of the one mysteriously imitates the ways of the other, in a divine rhythm. As the man “throws his seed on the ground,” it becomes a mirror of his life. Just as he sleeps and rises, so the seed dies and sprouts new life. And, just as he is involved in three progressive actions, throwing, sleeping, and rising, so the seed has three progressive stages of growth: first, the blade, then the ear, and finally, the full grain in the ear.<sup>2</sup> As the man methodically works his way through the fertile fields, and carefully observes the wonders of the seed, he sees his own life mirrored, until with the passing of time, progressive growth leads to a bountiful harvest.

The image of the man and the seed reminds me of pairs figure skating, in which the couple, each the mirror image of the other, float across the ice in a heavenly dance. And yet, what makes the dance even more exquisite is the fact that there is space and freedom between the partners.

## B. The ways of the seed distance the man from growth

Gundry points out in his commentary: “the daily round of sleeping at night and rising at day not only provides the passage of time necessary to growth, but also distances the man from the growth.”<sup>3</sup> After the man sows the seed, he sleeps. He does not try to maintain control of the seed. And as he sleeps, so does the seed, which enters the sleep of death. When the man rises in the morning, he observes an amazing mystery. A miracle has occurred, how, he does not know. The mystery captures him in awe and wonder. The point of the parable is that it is at the precise moment when the farmer lets go and sleeps, that the divine wonders begin to work.

Judah Halevi, who was born in 1080, was one of Israel’s greatest poets and thinkers. He comments about this amazing mystery of the seed:

God has a secret and wise design concerning us, which should be compared to the wisdom hidden in the seed which falls into the ground, where it undergoes an external transformation into earth, water and dirt, without leaving a trace for him who looks down upon it. It is, however, the seed itself which transforms earth and water into its own substance, carries it from one stage to another, until it refines the elements and transfers them into something like itself, casting off husks, leaves, etc., and allowing the pure core to appear, capable of bearing the Divine Influence. The original seed produced the tree bearing fruit resembling that from which it had been produced. In the same manner the law of Moses transforms each one who honestly follows it, though it may externally repel him. The nations merely serve to introduce and pave the way for the expected Messiah, who is the fruition, and they will all become His fruit. Then, if they acknowledge Him, they will be-

come one tree.<sup>4</sup>

What insight! Like Jesus, this man was not ignorant of the prophecies of Isaiah.

So for God to work and enter into the human activity of sowing, the farmer must go to sleep. Notice also that when the crop has produced its fruit, it does so “by itself,” without the man; and that the readiness of the harvest is determined by the readiness of the fruit, not the decision of the man. So while the growth of the seed mirrors the ways of the man, it is also independent from the man. Man does not determine the fruit, nor the time of harvest. But at the point of harvest, the man is needed again. When he observes that the grain is fully mature, he immediately puts in the sickle. So now the divine dance is complete, as we have observed this “alternating rhythm that starts with a man, leaves him, returns to him, leaves him again, and ends with him.”<sup>5</sup>

As to the meaning of the parable, Tom Wright sums it up well in these words:

Israel’s god is not working in a sudden dramatic way. He will not bring in his kingdom in the manner that Jesus’ contemporaries desired. He is working in a way that is hidden and opaque, but which, nevertheless, Israel *ought* to recognize. There is something strangely familiar about the secret seed. It sleeps and rises, just as the observer does, and yet he does not understand. There may be overtones here of resurrection: this is how the creator god raises the dead in the inauguration of the kingdom, by sowing seeds and letting them grow secretly so that only those with eyes to see can realize what is happening. There are, too, clear overtones of the apocalyptic scenario that is to come: when harvest comes, he puts in the sickle. This refers directly to a passage in Joel (3.13) which speaks of the great coming of judgment and harvest. Jesus is not abandoning the idea that there will be a great judgment in which Israel’s destiny will at last be realized. He is reinterpreting it, declaring that, though there will come a day of clear vindication, at the moment, i.e. during Jesus’ ministry, the seed is growing quietly in ways that Israel does not understand—though she should.<sup>6</sup>

## C. Implications for fruit-bearing

What implications can we draw from the parable of the man sowing his seed? I think Jesus is imparting three secrets of the kingdom that create a paradigm for how we cultivate spiritual life. These are found in the three activities of the man: sowing, sleeping, and reaping (i.e. sending the sickle).

First, we learn that the kingdom grows by the deliberate activity of sowing the word in good soil. This is the word of God, which Isaiah said would not go forth without accomplishing the task for which he had sent it. This word is seed that is divinely powerful for eternal life. It must not be tarnished by the opinions of men, or diluted by modern day currents in order to make it politically correct. It does not need to be packaged and

marketed for mass appeal, nor does it need to be defended. It merely needs to be *secretly* sown in good soil and it will bear eternal fruit. That is what Peter said, “you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and abiding word of God...Therefore,...like newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the word, that by it you may grow in respect to salvation” (1 Pet 1:23; 2:2).

Sierra County, which lies two hours south of Albuquerque, in New Mexico, is populated by cattle ranchers who live in scattered small towns with populations of less than thirty-five or so. Members of one city council in that county declared 1997 to be the Year of the Bible, and they placed daily Bible readings in local newspapers. This resulted in a lot of opposition at first, but the council members responded that if people didn’t like what they had done, then they were free to throw them out at the next election. My in-laws, who live in Albuquerque, told me they got reports of people buying Bibles and coming to faith in Christ. All this without hype, marketing, or conferences—just reading the Bible. The kingdom grows like an anonymous man who just goes into the fields and sows his seed, silently, secretly, and expectantly. One writer has said that all great projects are conceived in secret.

The second requirement to cultivating spiritual life is that after we have sown the seed, we must go to bed. We must let go so that God can work with the seed and cause it to germinate and sprout. Too often we try to maintain control of those we are attempting to nurture. We act like restless, nervous farmers who sneak out into the fields by moonlight to dig up the seed and inspect the results. Though we are laden with worthy concern, we often do more harm than good, and ruin any possibility of the divine work of integration. Control is very destructive to relationships.

One thing that grieves me today is the infiltration into the church of one of the most worldly of occupations, that of the lobbyist. Lobbyists are driven by a single quest. They are so eager to achieve a certain result, no matter how good the cause, they come to the field, strip off the topsoil, and impose developmental structures like strip malls, totally ignoring the organic workings of the soil. This does bring results, but in my opinion, very little fruit. There is no thought of sleep, no room for divine activity, no time for internalization or individual response. The lobbyist just wants to get the job done. Don’t be a Christian lobbyist! There is no room for coercion in the kingdom. Have you ever see a seed grow by coercion?

Such truth in our parable also calls into question the quest for speed—the element that is most valued today. This painful striving to do things faster and faster robs our lives of the value that comes through divine integration. Our daily rising and sleeping must serve as a continual reminder that if we want God to enter into our daily activity of sowing, we have to learn to sleep, to let go, and die.

So we sow, and then we sleep. Finally, we reap. Then, when the harvest is ready, we put in the sickle. The term for this is literally, “he sends” the sickle. This word comes from the same root as the noun *apostle*, those “sent ones” whom Jesus sent out two by two, in Mark 6:7. As they sowed the word, the apostles expected to reap spiritual fruit in people’s lives. They did not determine what that fruit was, or when it would appear, but they knew it was coming. As Paul wrote to the Colossians, “All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God’s grace in all its truth” (Col 1:6 NIV).

But once that fruit appeared, the apostles felt a keen responsibility to harvest it. When life-changing transformation occurred, it was not to go unnoticed. Time was taken to publicly give thanks, in a letter, a worship service, or through the giving of financial blessing. Paul asked the Corinthians, “If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you?” (1 Cor 9:11 NIV). So the word was sown in expectation of fruit, and when that became evident through the process of time, it was sealed in appreciation. Let us never lose sight of this.

May you enter into this wonderful divine dance of man and seed, and may you feel the heavenly rhythms pulsating through all that you do.

Now we come to the final parable in this series, that of the tiny mustard seed.

## II. The parable of the mustard seed (4:30-32)

**And He said, “How shall we picture the kingdom of God, or by what parable shall we present it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the soil, though it is smaller than all the seeds that are upon the soil, yet when it is sown, grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and forms large branches; so that the birds of the air can nest under its shade.”**

Jesus asks, with what shall we picture the kingdom? It is like a mustard seed which is smaller than all the seeds that are sown. The fact that the mustard seed was the smallest of all seeds was proverbial in Palestine.<sup>7</sup> Yet, though it was the smallest, it produced a tree that was larger than all the garden plants. It grew to about fifteen feet in height and had branches thick enough to support a bird. The image of a tree was a common Old Testament usage to refer to a king and his kingdom. Daniel in his prophecy says, “The tree that you saw, which became large and grew strong...it is you, O king” (Dan 4:20-22). So here the tree is an apt symbol of the new King and his ironically “small” beginnings.

The image of birds of the air nesting in its shade comes from the prophet Ezekiel, who envisioned a future day when God would sow his kingdom in such a way that,

**“I myself will take a shoot from the very top of a ce-**

**dar and plant it; I will break off a tender sprig from its topmost shoots and plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain heights of Israel I will plant it; it will produce branches and bear fruit and become a splendid cedar. Birds of every kind will nest in it; they will find shelter in the shade of its branches. All the trees of the field will know that I the Lord bring down the tall tree and make the low tree grow tall. I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish.” (Ezek 17:22-24 NIV)**

Some commentators suggest that the reference to the birds nesting in the shade of its branches may be referring to the gentile nations coming under the shade of this magnificent tree. I think there is merit to that thought, although we can't know for certain. But in any case, the point is clear. We should not be put off by what looks like insignificant beginnings. This is how God begins his kingdom, with a King who appeared as a mere shoot of the stump of Jesse. He was not part of mainline Judaism, and he had no credentials. He was more like a sucker shoot that is plucked up “like a root out of parched ground,” with seemingly no potential. “He had no stately form or majesty that we should look-upon Him...He...was like one from whom men hide their face, He was despised, and we did not esteem Him” (Isa 53:2-3). Yet, Isaiah says of him,

**“Then a shoot will spring from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots will bear fruit” (Isa 11:1).**

This stump of Jesse will bear great fruit. His influence will be so great that all nations will come under the protection of his shade. The same is true as we continue advancing the kingdom. This word of the gospel we possess appears insignificant to the world. It is drowned out in our athletic arenas, scorned by our universities, and mocked by our media. In our hands these seeds appear weightless. One breath and they seem to disappear unnoticed into the air. But when they are faithfully sown in humble hearts, on the outskirts of all humanity, they grow, take over, and become the driving force of a life. Eventually the person in whom these insignificant seeds are planted has a broader influence than any university or government can grant. And to our amazement, unexpected guests come from all over the nations to take shelter in their shade.

As we turn to the book of Acts, this is exactly what we find. The kingdom is always growing in new arenas, from the humblest of beginnings, among obscure people of little status and no money, and yet these “no names” become the driving force of history. Imagine what it will be like when that insignificant Jew, a no-name in Rome, beheaded by Nero, wakes us from sleep

and meets all of us who took shelter in the shade of his letters, most of which were written from a prison cell. There will not be an ocean big enough to contain his tears of joy on that day. And he did it all with a little bag of seed. The lesson is clear: Don't be put off by humble beginnings.

Jesus concludes his teaching on parables with the same theme he began with, that of “hearing.”

### **III. The conclusion of the parables (4:33-34)**

**And with many such parables He was speaking the word to them as they were able to hear it; and He did not speak to them without a parable; but He was explaining everything privately to His own disciples.**

Mark brings this section to an end by saying that Jesus continued to speak the word of God to them, but he disguised it in parables. This was an organic process. Jesus spoke to them “as they were able to hear it.” Parables were not shared for the sake of information; they were like rich meals that had to be eaten, digested and absorbed before one could go on to the next course. And they served the purpose of dividing Israel into two camps, based on their ability to hear. Just as *hearing* was the backbone of spirituality for ancient Israel (“Hear, O Israel!” Deut 6:4) so now it became the way into the new Israel. Those with ears to hear, who took time to enter into the cryptic images of the parable, would see in it Israel's story retold and made new in Jesus; and they would be awakened with awe as they stood at the nerve center of history. But those who refused to hear would not see below the surface. One group was swallowed up in love, the other left to petrify in their own petty, private universe.

What amazing force is contained in these innocuous little stories! Only one question remains: to which group do you belong?

1. Elie Wiesel, *Memoirs: All Rivers Run to the Sea* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 321.
2. I am dependent on Robert Gundry for these thoughts in his excellent work, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 220.
3. Gundry, *Mark*, 220.
4. Judah Halevi, *An Argument for the Faith of Israel, The Kuzari* (New York: Schocken, 1964), 226-227.
5. Gundry, *Mark*, 221.
6. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 240-241.
7. C. H. Hunzinger, “*sinapi*,” *TDNT*, 7:289.

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