

The Memoirs of Peter
The Mysterious Growth of God's Kingdom
Mark 4:26-34
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In February of 1978, the little country church that my dad was helping, doing music for them at the time, sponsored a Bible conference. What that meant for that little church was that all of us who attended every week came back for several evenings during the week and listened to someone teach the Bible. Since my dad was kind of an interim music director, it meant that we were there every service. That included the special services, and so, like it or not, on that February night I showed up in this little church.

Prior to that evening I had made several professions of faith, and I'd been baptized twice. But that week was a little different. There was a man whose name I still remember, because there was another man by this name who was executed around that same time. His name was Gary Gilmore. And this particular pastor who was there for that week did something that was very unusual in my world. He actually read the text, and then he explained the text in its context. It was really shocking. His sermon was about heaven. It was taken from Revelation 21:22. It wasn't really evangelistic at all. But as he read those verses at the end of Revelation that describe the kind of people who won't be in heaven; I saw myself in the words of the text.

And I saw my own life displayed in the text of Revelation, and I realized that someday I would stand before God and that I would be declared guilty. That there was no way I was going to be in heaven. All the truth that my mind had accumulated over the years sitting in churches, listening to messages, came crashing in around my soul. Those seeds that had been sown, that had lain dormant for so long, suddenly sprung to life. That night the seeds of truth that had been sown long before produced a harvest of salvation.

As I think back on the events of that night and my life leading up to that day, I am now more aware than ever of just how mysterious the path of the Word of God really is in the human heart. Jesus makes exactly that point in the next parable that we come to in Mark 4, and I invite you to turn there with me tonight: Mark 4:26. Really, the next two parables in the conclusion of His teaching all go together, so it's really one section. I'm going to read it all, and we'll just look at

the first parable tonight. Mark 4:26,

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

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, it 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.”

With many such parables He was speaking the word to them, so far 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.

On that fateful day in Jesus’ ministry when He began in the morning by healing a demoniac; and then was accused shortly thereafter by the Pharisees and the Scribes sent from Jerusalem of being in league with the devil; on the same day when His family arrived while He was teaching and tried to take Him by force back to Nazareth,; on that day Jesus got in a boat on the northwest edge of the Sea of Galilee and taught a large crowd that had gathered there on the seashore. But that day Jesus took an entirely new approach. The thrust of His teaching ministry that morning was parables. He’d used parables before but never so profusely, never so extensively.

He started out with the Parable of the Soils that we’ve studied together, and then there were others in sort of rapid succession: the brief Parable of the Lamp, and then the Parable of the Measure that we examined last week. And then comes a small parable that only Mark records, and it’s the only parable that Mark alone records. That highlights its importance: it’s importance, certainly, for Mark; its importance for Peter, who was explaining all of this to Mark; and

ultimately its importance for the Holy Spirit, who was inspiring all of this. And the parable that He begins with is the Parable of the Growing Seed I read for you in verses 26-29.

Let's look at this parable. I've already read it to you. Let's start with the sower's activity. Verse 26, "And He was saying, 'The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil.'" Obviously, the focus of this parable, and the others, is on the true nature of Jesus' kingdom: "The kingdom of God is like." The kingdom of God is an expression that occurs some fourteen times in Mark's Gospel. It is simply "the rule of God." It speaks of the rule, the universal, sovereign rule of God, which has always been true. It also speaks of the messianic or mediatorial rule of God as the theologians would call it. It's God rule through His Messiah, through His Son the Mediator.

In the Old Testament, if you read much there, you'll find that this messianic, mediatorial rule through the Messiah seems at times to be physical and political. And, of course, it is. It's pointing to what? The millennial reign of Christ. But before Jesus came the teachers of the Law, the Scribes and Pharisees, had determined that that must speak of the first time, the only time, the Messiah would come. Therefore, they were very confused about the nature of Messiah's mission.

And when He came, when Jesus came, the Jews were expecting (many of them) for Messiah to bring in a political kingdom. But Jesus taught them that, no, the kingdom I'm bringing now is not political. That's for later. The kingdom I'm bringing now is a spiritual kingdom. I'm going to rule over the hearts of men; you will bow to My rule in your hearts. So, Jesus set out to correct their thinking about the nature of His kingdom, His current spiritual kingdom, with a number of parables.

He started with the Parable of the Soils, and now comes one that focuses not on the soils but on the seed. This parable we've called, I've called for you, the Parable of the Growing Seed. It communicates something about the nature of the spiritual kingdom over which Christ rules right now. There are two possible directions this parable could go. One of them is that it is a description of the entire sweep of redemptive history from Jesus' first coming to His second.

In this case it would mean this: that during His earthly ministry here Jesus planted the seed, the seed of the Gospel, and at some point, He's going to return; and when He returns a second time there'll be a harvest, and He'll gather the harvest from the seeds that He planted when He was here. Now that's possible. That's a possible interpretation of this parable, and it's certainly true. That is true, but I don't think that's what Jesus means primarily in this parable.

More likely, this parable is a description of the growth of the seed of the Gospel in each individual heart. In this case, Jesus is playing off the Parable of the Soils, and here He's explaining how the seed ends up bearing fruit in eternal life in the good soil. Remember, there's the good soil from the Parable of the Soils; the seed falls there, and it grows? Now Jesus comes back to that good soil, and He explains exactly how that process plays out, how the Word works in the hearts of those whose hearts have been prepared by God to receive it. So, this parable then is a description of the progress and growth of the Word of God in an unregenerate heart between the time that seed is sown in the heart and the time that seed bears fruit in the life when true salvation comes.

Now, with that big picture in mind, let's look then at the parable. Jesus begins the parable like this: "And He was saying, 'The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil.'" Again, if you'd lived in Galilee this would have been a very familiar scene, a regular part of your life. Every year you would've seen people sowing seed. In Galilee in the first century the primary crop was wheat. That's what people would have seen constantly sown. One expert on the field estimates that wheat grain constituted over 50% of the average person's total calorie intake. Fifty percent of their calories were from wheat, followed by legumes (or lentils specifically), olive oil, and fruit. Those were the staples of a first century Galilee diet. So, the wheat harvest then was absolutely crucial.

Understand, that when you think about that area, there're a couple of geographic influences that affect that area. The climate in Israel is driven by these two major geographic features that surround it on each side. There's Israel. On one side is the great desert. May through September, Israel's weather is hot and dry, affected by that great desert to her east. Like

California, there's no rain at all in those months. The other half of the year, October through April, the fall and winter and spring, the climate is affected by the Mediterranean on her west. So, it's wet and cooler.

You've heard the Bible speak about the early rains and the latter rains? Well, the early rains come in October when the rainy season starts, and the weather begins to come off of the Mediterranean and not off the desert. And then the latter rains come at the end of the rainy season in March and April. So, the best growing season then is between October and April, the half of the year when the weather's cooler, and the rain comes.

So then, farmers prepared their fields for planting in the late fall. In October, November, they would till the soil, they would plant. And then in May and sometimes continuing into June, they would harvest the ripened wheat. So, it was about a six-month process from the time you prepared your field until the time you reaped your wheat. It had to happen at that particular time—they had to harvest it then, because there was this-this sort of narrow window between when the later rains stopped and when those hot, desert winds began to blow and kill everything in its path. So, Jesus says then, in October, November, a man casts his wheat seed upon the soil there upon the plains of Galilee.

Now just a few minutes before this of course, Jesus had used the description of the seed and the soils. Later He would explain it to His disciples. And remember what the seed was in that parable? The seed was the Word of God. And so, it's likely in such close proximity, Jesus intends us to understand the same thing here by the "seed". So, Jesus' meaning then is this: someone sows the Word of God, specifically the Gospel, and then comes the growth mystery, the growth mystery. Verse 27 says, "And he goes to bed at night and gets up by day, and the seed sprouts and grows; how, he himself does not know." Verse 27, literally, the text says this: and he would sleep, and he would get up night and day. And he would sleep and get up night and day.

The picture is that day after day this routine continues while a large period of time passes. He goes to bed, he gets up, he goes to bed, he gets up; night after night, day after day, on and on. That's the picture. Now, this doesn't mean the farmer was ignoring his fields, no good farmer

does. Probably each day he's pulling weeds and maybe fertilizing with animal dung, maybe getting irrigation ditches to provide water to his field. But all this time he has absolutely nothing to do with the seeds he planted. In fact, look at verse 27. While day after day passes, "The seed sprouts and [it] grows," or literally, "lengthens". So, it begins to grow. There's this mystery of growth going on. The farmer is oblivious to what's really happening.

Jesus is making a couple of points here about this mystery surrounding the growth of the seed. First of all, we can't understand how it grows. Look at verse 27 again: "He goes to bed at night and gets up by day, and the seed sprouts and grows; how, he himself does not know." Now, that's obviously true on the physical level with the seed. We know that God made seeds. We know that He made them to work this way. If you go back to Genesis 1, He made every seed-bearing plant, and He made it to reproduce after his kind. We understand that.

But we don't understand the mystery behind how seeds really work. O, we can take classes in school, but you can read the most comprehensive description of how seeds grow, and you'll realize that although we can explain some mechanics of the process, we still can't remove much of the mystery for how seeds work. With all of our technological advances we still don't know how physical seeds work in all of their intricacies.

Certainly, the first century farmer wouldn't have known even what we know. Between his sowing and his reaping something happened. That he knew, but he didn't know how. He knew there were things he could do that would help, there were things he could do that would hinder, but the process of growth itself was one of the mysteries of life. One commentator writes,

All the farmer could do is trust. To be sure, he can cover the seed, root up weeds, loosen the soil, add fertilizer, perhaps even channel water to his plot. All these things are important, but he cannot cause the seed to sprout and grow. The rest he must leave entirely to the seed and ultimately to the One who created the seed, who knows it thoroughly and activates it. The farmer must trust and pray, and he must wait patiently.

That's on the physical level, but Jesus is applying this to the spiritual level. The main point holds true on the spiritual level as well. Who can fully understand or explain the work of the Word of God in the human heart? We know that the Word is the instrument that God uses, don't we? Scripture's clear about that. We know in James 1:18, for example, "In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures." By the Word of Truth He birthed us, He gave us life.

First Peter 1:23, "For you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable [seed], that is, ... the living and enduring word of God." The Word of God is the seed God uses to bring life. We know that, but we don't understand exactly how it all works. That's Jesus' point. We "can't" understand how it all works. Jesus wanted us to know that.

He also wanted us to know that we can't make the seed grow. Not only do we not fully understand it, but we can't make it grow. Verse 28, "The soil produces crops by itself." Now, Jesus is using a figure of speech here. He doesn't mean the dirt produces crops. He's using metonymy. He's basically speaking of the seed but referring to the soil. So, in other words, He's saying the seed that's planted in the soil literally bears fruit on its own or by itself. You'll recognize the Greek word "by itself". It's "automatos", from which we get our word "automatic". The seed, is automatic. It produces automatically. God has made it that way. The only other place, by the way, this word occurs in the New Testament (this word "by itself" or "automatos", is in Acts 12:10, where you remember when Peter is-is let out of prison by the angel. "When they had passed the first and second guard, they came to the iron gate that leads into the city, which opened for them [automatos]." Automatically, by itself.

Jesus says the seed of the Word of God is like that. It's sown into a heart, and God has put everything in the seed necessary for it to function "automatos", automatically. It is, of course, used by the Holy Spirit of God, but God has written the right information into the seed (now I'm talking physically), into that physical seed so that it knows what to do, when it ought to do it, and how to accomplish its task. Jesus' point is that we can't make the seed of the Word of God grow and produce fruit in the lives of others. The growth of the seed in good soil is absolutely independent of human effort or action. There is nothing I can do.

Let that sink into your head a moment when it comes to the people with whom you're witnessing. Don't we want to get inside their brains and flip the switch? Maybe it's a parent, or maybe it's a child, or maybe it's a friend, a co-worker, a neighbor. And we just don't understand. Why don't they get it? If only I could ... Jesus says you can't. The soil, or the seed in the soil produces crops "automatos", automatically, by itself, independently of any human effort or action. There's nothing I can do.

By the way, this flies in the face of a lot of what goes on in the church of Jesus Christ. People don't understand this, and so they try, well-meaning Christians try to manipulate people to try to somehow influence the growth of the seed in the heart; make the circumstances right, make them comfortable, make "whatever" appealing. In his book *The Purpose Driven Church*, Rick Warren writes this,:

It is my deep conviction that anybody can be won to Christ if you discover the key to his or her heart. The most likely place to start is with the person's felt needs, with the person's felt needs." In other words, if I can get inside that person's heart and know what makes them tick, I can-I can bring anyone to see the seed grow in their hearts. I can make that seed grow in their heart if I know how to water it properly.

Compare that to what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 3:6, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth."

There's one Scripture that speaks very specifically to this. I want you to turn there with me: John 3. In John 3 this whole idea that we can't make the seed grow, we can't bring life to a human heart. In John 3 you remember the interchange between Jesus and Nicodemus. And in 4, "Nicodemus said to Him, 'How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?'" Jesus has told him that you have to be born again or born from above to see the kingdom of God, and Nicodemus is incredulous. How can that happen? He's not saying I want to be born physically again. Nicodemus is a bright man.

He's playing off of Jesus' comment and saying, how do you start over? How can you be remade morally and spiritually? And Jesus says to him in verse 5, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God."

"Born of water." What does that mean? Well, in Jewish life and in the Old Testament, water was always symbolic of purification. Jesus was telling Nicodemus that to enter the kingdom of God, to enter His spiritual kingdom where He ruled, Nicodemus must first have a kind of rebirth characterized by complete purification. And then He said you must be "... born of ... the Spirit." In John's writings that consistently means a supernatural act of new birth accomplished by the Spirit of God. In other words, listen carefully, Jesus was teaching Nicodemus that to enter His spiritual kingdom where Jesus rules over every heart, he was entirely, Nicodemus was entirely dependent on the Spirit of God, just as we were entirely dependent on our human parents for our physical birth.

How many people in here had anything to do with your physical conception and your physical birth? None at all. We don't enter the kingdom, Jesus says, because we decide to. It's the Spirit's decision. You have to be born by the Spirit. In fact, in verse 8, Jesus says the new birth is like the wind, the-wind and the work of the Spirit in this, "The wind blows where it wishes." In other words, Nicodemus, you are incapable of the change necessary for you to enter the kingdom of God. Verse 8, you hear the sound of it, you can see the effects, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it goes. It's inscrutable; it's mysterious. The point is this: we don't know exactly how the Spirit of God uses the Word of God to affect this radical change in people, and we certainly can't reproduce it. That's what He was telling Nicodemus. It's the work of God, not of man.

Back to our passage in Mark 4, this mystery surrounding the growth of the seed. Jesus makes a third point here: it grows slowly, at times even imperceptibly. Look at verse 28 again, "The soil produces crops by itself; first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head." Those words describe a slow, steady, but at times even almost imperceptible process of growth. "First the blade": the shoots of the plant that resemble grass in its early stages of development. "Then the head": eventually, on the top of that grass of wheat comes a head, an immature head not fully ripened, not fully developed, but it begins to appear. And then it eventually, when it's fully

done after those months of growth there is the head: fully matured with grain that can be harvested and used. This whole process takes months, and at times an observer might wonder if there ever will be a harvest. It is a mysterious thing, the growth of the seed. And Jesus' point is, the growth of the Word of God in the human heart is equally mysterious; you can't fully understand it; you can't control it; and it's hard to even observe what's going on.

There's a third point Jesus makes as He unfolds this: it's the harvest's certainty. The harvest's certainty. Notice what He says in verse 29; "But when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come." It takes a lot of time, but eventually, good wheat seed that falls in good soil will produce a harvest. So, this is, in effect, a promise that whenever the Word of God is sown in good soil, it will eventually produce a harvest. You can't know for a long time if it is good soil. Back to the Parable of the Soils: there may be plants among the thorns, you know, thorn plants, that grow up and choke out the seed; there may be rock, bedrock underneath that doesn't allow it to grow. In addition to that, you can't know for a while if it's growth of "real" wheat or if it's a "false" wheat.

There's another parable Jesus gave on that same day that Mark doesn't provide us with. You remember the Parable of the Tares, the wheat and the tares? The devil sows a kind of pseudo wheat. It's called darnel, that for a while looks like it might be real wheat. So, for a while you don't even know if it's real wheat plant or a false wheat plant. Moreover, even the real wheat in good soil often grows incredibly slowly, even imperceptibly, so it requires great patience to see a harvest come. But good seed in good soil guarantees there will eventually be a harvest. The growth may be slow, but it is inevitable.

In Galilee, the wheat was planted in October, November, and harvested in May and early June. It was a long, slow process. Regeneration, the new birth, happens in a moment of time. But the work of the Spirit of God using the Word of God to bring fruit in the life, to bring that person to the point of salvation, to germinate that seed that's been planted, can be a long, slow process. That's the parable.

Now, I want us to take, in the next few minutes, and consider the implications. And there really

is some profound implications from this short little parable. The first one is this, God alone is sovereign in salvation. William Henrickson writes,

On this aspect of the truth, namely God's sovereignty, the present parable places the emphasis. It teaches that God alone, not the farmer, thoroughly understands and is, in fact, the author of physical growth. So also, God alone, not man, thoroughly understands and is the author of spiritual growth, the establishment and process of the reign of God in hearts and lives.

It's as Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 3:6, I planted, Apollos watered, but God [ultimately is the one who causes] ... the growth." Don't ever forget that we have a responsibility in the process, but our responsibility is not to produce life, our responsibility is to sow the seed.

And that brings me to the second implication, and it's a huge one. Jesus' teaching in this parable compels every one of us to be engaged and involved in sowing the seed. Did you notice that there's only one condition in which good soil, that is, a heart that's been prepared by God, doesn't produce a harvest? When doesn't good soil produce a harvest? When the seed isn't sown. You see, we believe very strongly in the sovereignty of God in salvation. I don't apologize for that for one moment. God is the author of salvation. But there is an essential part of salvation for which man alone is responsible, and it's the sowing of the seed.

Look at Romans 10. Really an amazing chapter and a chapter we turn to often, because it follows Romans 9 where God's sovereignty in salvation is championed. But in Romans 10, look at verse 8.

... "THE WORD IS NEAR YOU, IN YOUR MOUTH AND IN YOUR HEART"—that is, the [message] ... of faith which we are preaching, that if you confess with your mouth Jesus *as* Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. For the Scripture says, 'WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED.' ...

[There's] no distinction between Jew and Greek ...] Verse 13, [So] ...

‘WHOEVER WILL CALL ON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED.’—without distinction for their background. [We love that, don't we? But notice how Paul progresses.] Verse 14,

“How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed?” [You have to believe to call out to God, to believe that He will respond, that He will answer.

And] “How will they believe [how will they have faith] in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher?”

Paul is saying, while God is sovereign in salvation, He has put in place a system, and that system requires that we human beings sow the seed. It's true of physical plants and harvest, and it's true of a spiritual harvest as well. You and I are not responsible to get anyone saved, but we are responsible to sow the seed of the Gospel. I, a moment ago, reminded you of 1 Corinthians 3:6. Look at it again. God causes the growth, but notice: Paul planted; Apollos watered. Paul sowed; Apollos applied water. The only human activity for which we are responsible in the growth of the kingdom in a human heart is sowing and watering and waiting. And you don't have to understand how it works, just sow the truth.

My father, who's been with the Lord now many years, loved gardening. Behind our two-acre yard in Mobile, Alabama, there was nothing but woods and swamp. And so, my dad had a bright idea one year. He said, you know I'm going to contact the man who owns that property, and I'm going to get permission for us to have a garden. Well, it sounded like a great idea to me. Go for it, Dad, that's wonderful. And then I learned who was going to do the work. The first year, I was the plow. My dad and I literally turned that half-acre of ground shovel by shovel. We started by clearing out the brush, and if you've ever been in a swampland in Alabama, you know what that's like. So, we cleared out a half-acre of brush and trees and all that was there, and then literally shovel by shovel we turned that entire half-acre. And then we came back with hoes, and foot-by-foot we broke up that Alabama clay and topsoil until the soil was prepared.

The next year I was quite relieved when my dad decided that he would buy us a Troy Built rototiller. It still took a lot of time in 90-degree Alabama heat and 95% humidity, but at least the

machine was doing most of the work. Once we prepared the rows, or excuse me, once we prepared the soil, we made the rows.

And then we went to the local Ace Hardware store and bought a number of packets of seeds. My dad loved peppers, so there was a disproportionate amount of that garden that was off limits to the rest of us: peppers of various kinds which we would harvest, and my mom would put in the blender and make this horrific pepper-blended sauce that my dad proceeded to put on everything imaginable. But we planted those seeds. And you know—I thought as we planted them, you know, we—you make those rows, and you make the little lines, and you come along with the packets, and you put the seeds; and I thought, you know, that was a whole lot of work for these little seeds. But we planted the seeds, and we covered them up. The truth is, I had only a vague idea about how those seeds worked. I hadn't even gotten to all of the life sciences in high school. But we knew they would work, and so we planted them.

Folks, it works the same way in the spiritual world. We don't have to understand. We can't understand how completely the Word of God works in human hearts either, but we sow it in faith of a coming harvest. We just sow the Gospel, sow the Word, and the leave the soil preparation and the yield to God. This is really a great encouragement and a comfort. It's not my job to make sure the seed produces. I can't. It's my job to sow it.

I was reminded of this very powerfully yesterday. I had a strange set of circumstances occur yesterday morning. My phone rang, and I noticed that it was (on the caller ID) that it was from a hospital in the area. And so, I picked up the phone, and a man introduced himself and said, you don't know me, but my name's so-and-so. And he said, I'm 66 years old, and I'm in the hospital. And he said, I have been cleared medically to leave the hospital, but I had to drive (I don't have family in the area), and so I had to drive myself to the hospital. My car's parked out by the emergency room, and it has a half-gallon of gas, and the doctor won't release me until-until someone comes and helps me with gas.

And so—the story sounded a little different to me, this has never happened—and so I said, how did you get my number? He said, well in the Yellow Pages your name is listed as the pastor.

And nobody's answering at any churches, and so I cross-checked in the White Pages and found you and called you. I said, all right, well that's pretty creative. So, I said, let me speak to the nurse. And I spoke to the nurse that was on duty there, and she verified the whole story and was very grateful for a willingness to be involved. And so, I got my little five-gallon gas can and ran over to Wal-Mart and gave him some other things that would help him.

And when I went down—here's my point—I went down there, and I got to the hospital and while the man was being discharged, I stepped out of his room. I excused myself as the nurse was rehearsing all of the things that he needed to know medically. And so, I'm waiting in the hallway thinking that my whole responsibility for being there that day is simply to express the love of God to this man and to have a chance to share the Gospel with him. And as I'm waiting in the hallway—I have to go back and tell you that when I first arrived at the hospital, I went to the nurses station asking for the nurse I had spoken with. And the nurse I spoke with that-when I got to the hospital said, no, I'm not that nurse, but I can show you where she is. And so, she took me down the hallway, introduced me to the nurse I had spoken to. The nurse that I had initially run into, that didn't know why I was there, happened to come down the hallway while I was standing out in the hallway waiting for the man I came to provide gas for to be done talking to the nurse. And so, I'm standing in the hallway, she comes along and says, sir, did you get what you needed? And I said, well, yeah. And I explained to her briefly why I was there.

And she said, that's great. She said, you know, I used to go to church. I'm really quite skeptical now about those sort of things. She said, I was, I was actually an Anglican or an Episcopalian, and I saw you were-you were Anglican. And I said—we began to talk about it, and she explained her reserve. And she began to ask questions about how do you know it's true, and how do you know to trust Jesus Christ, how you know that He's telling the truth, that He is accurate in what He says? And I just took her back to the Gospel of John. Jesus Himself said look, if I'm not raised from the dead in three days, then don't believe a word I said. I said, you got to ask yourself who is Jesus Christ, and is He still, is His body still buried in the tomb in the middle east? If it is, then forget everything He said. But if it isn't, you've got to deal with who Jesus Christ is. And we had this wonderful conversation. And I just left having worked on this message; my mind was all in this text.

And I left the hospital driving away, and I'm thinking, I think I just had a chance to do what this text says. In two hearts I got to sow the seed. I may never see those people again. But I sowed the seed, and who knows what the Lord will do with that seed? That's Jesus' point. Our duty is simply to sow the seed, and He will take care of the growth.

The third implication of this text is: the power of God is in the seed. That's literally true of the seed when it comes to physical plants. I read a little bit this week about the physiology of seeds. Did you know there are some two hundred and fifty thousand kinds of plants that produce seeds? The encyclopedia says each seed consists of three parts. It has an embryo or a partially developed plant with an immature root and stem. It has a supply of stored food within that seed, and it has a seed coating to protect the seed. Seeds know, by the providence of God, by the work and creative power of God, know to remain dormant until the conditions are right. In fact, seeds can remain dormant on average, they can remain viable, from a few weeks to in some cases fifty years. (I think some of those seeds are growing in my yard.) In one case a seed, a Lotus plant seed, thousands of years old was given the right conditions by scientists and germinated. It's amazing. How does all that work? *Answers in Genesis* describes another amazing thing about seeds. They write,

Botan-eh-botanists have learned that the principles of fiber optics are used in growing plants. As soon as the growth tip touches the sunlight (as soon as it breaks through the soil, touches the sunlight) it begins gathering this golden energy by sending it down living optical fibers to the plant's growth center in the seed. There with the soil's damp darkness all around it, the heart of the seed is nevertheless basking in sunlight which powers its rapid cell divisions as the plant keeps doubling in size. Scientists have learned that the system works so well that the plant's optical system actually transports a focused image of the light source to the seed below.

So, when you see that little plant start coming, breaking through the soil, it is sending light down into the heart of that seed so that it can grow. Amazing! So, God has so designed the seed that

everything it needs is within it. It's self-contained. That seed can be transported by a bird or wind or whatever thousands of miles away and still have everything it needs to grow. Just as a physical seed is endowed by God with amazing powers, so is the seed of the Word of God, the seed of the Gospel itself. James Edward writes, "The seed contains within itself fruit bearing potential. The seed like the Gospel prospers of itself."

Isn't this what the Bible teaches? Romans 1 talks about that, doesn't it? "I am not ashamed of the Gospel [of Christ] for"—what? "It is the power of God." The power's in the Gospel. God has designed it like the seed that you plant in the earth. It has everything it needs for the Spirit to use to bring life. In 1 Corinthians 1;18: "The word [or the message of] the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." It's the power of God in the message, but not only in the Gospel but in the larger Word of God; not merely the Gospel itself but all parts of the Word of God.

First Thessalonians 2:13, Paul says to the church there in Thessalonica, "For this reason we constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but *for* what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe." The Word of God is like that seed. It's self-contained. And it gets planted in the heart, sown in the heart, and it becomes God's power.

Second Timothy 3, Paul writes to Timothy, his son in the faith, and he says, "From childhood [you've] known the sacred writings [the Old Testament, and those sacred writings] ... are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus." In the Word of God is the power to bring life.

Folks, don't worry about arguing people into the faith. Where's the power? The power is in the Gospel. That doesn't mean you irrationally just quote Scripture to somebody without explaining it. It doesn't mean you don't answer their legitimate questions. But don't for a moment think that by the power of your arguments you are going to somehow do something that the Word of God isn't going to do. It is the seed. It is the self-contained unit that God intends for us to sow, and it's what God the Holy Spirit will use to bring life. It may be years before that seed is

germinated, but sow the seed, for it is the power of God.

There's another implication: sowing insures a harvest. You know, not all seed will fall on good soil, but some of it will; in fact, much of it will. I love the fact that the writer of Isaiah, the prophet Isaiah says this in Isaiah 55:

As the rain and the snow [quoting God here, putting His-the words of God down]
... 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; [in the same way] My word ... which goes forth
from My mouth; ... will not return to Me empty, [but it will accomplish] what I
desire, And [it won't return] without succeeding *in the matter* for which I sent it.

Listen, sowing ensures a harvest. You see this in Acts 18 as well. I won't take time to turn there, but in Acts 18 Paul has the Lord Himself speak to him. And the Lord says, listen, I want you to stay here, don't worry about the opposition you're facing, and I want you to keep sowing the Gospel—why? "... for I have many people in this city." You just keep sowing, and that seed, Paul, will fall on some good soil. Oh sure, there'll be some bad soil; there'll be some soil that has no place for it; there'll be soil that's hard where the devil comes and snatches it away; but you just keep sowing the seed, because I have many people in this city. And that seed is going to fall in good, prepared soil, and it will bear fruit.

And finally, be patient with God to use the Word sown. The growth of the Word of the kingdom in a person's heart may not be showy. It may not be dramatic. It may be quiet and imperceptible. So, sow the seed. Water patiently, and then wait like the farmer for God to do what He does. Listen, don't give up. Don't give up on that loved one, on that family member, on that friend, on that co-worker. Don't throw up your hands in exasperation. Sometimes the process of the growth of the seed is inexorably long. Just keep praying; keep watering; keep sowing; and wait for God to cause the growth. Sow the seed.

Let's pray together.

Father, thank You so much for this wonderful parable of our Lord's, for the reminder that there are so many things that we don't understand, that we can't produce.

Father, I pray that You would help us to do what You've commanded, to trust You, that all we need to do is sow the seed. Lord, make us faithful to share the Gospel with the people in our lives: people we know, strangers we come in contact with. Father, help us to do it graciously and gently. Help us to do it in love and not merely seeking another notch on our pistol grip of someone else we've collared. But Father, help us to do it with graciousness and love, caring for people, loving them.

But Father, help us to do it. Help us to do it because you've promised that if we'll sow the seed, some of that seed will fall on good soil, and You will cause it to grow. Lord, we can't understand or trace all of it, but help us to trust You and to believe what You've said: that the power is in the Gospel; that Your Spirit will use the Gospel presented, the truth about Christ shared, the truth about sin and righteousness and judgment and the good news of forgiveness to bring life.

The seed might lie in a heart dormant for a long time. But Father, if it's good soil that You've prepared, in Your time it'll germinate and produce a harvest of righteousness. Lord, help us to be faithful till Jesus comes.

We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.