

The Book of Mark
The Mysterious Growth of God's Kingdom (Part Two)
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Mark 4:26-34

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Well, I invite you to turn back with me again tonight to our study of the Gospel of Mark. It's been a great journey already. And as we come to the end of first major teaching section in Mark, it's been wonderful to see the parables of our Lord as He has unfolded them for us. Mark only gives us two big sections in which he reveals the teaching of Christ, and this is the end of the first of those. And it's strategic and strategically placed in his book: Mark 4 and the parables of our Lord.

As I thought about the parable we come to tonight, I thought about the British Empire, because we're talking about the mysterious growth of, really, God's empire, God's kingdom. England gets its name from one of the Germanic tribes that ruled in the fifth and sixth centuries: the Angles. It became a unified state in 927 A.D. That's a date that's not quite as familiar to you perhaps as the 1066 Battle of Hastings, but it became a unified state in 927 A.D. And you can see its size. It's size, probably at the time, was a little smaller than that, not encompassing all of the British Isles. But it grew from those small beginnings, ultimately, to become what historians call the British Empire. One encyclopedia reminds us that the British Empire at its height was the largest empire in history. And for over a century it was the foremost global power.

You can see on the map there some idea of the slightly darker areas (that doesn't show as well on the overhead) but the slightly darker, sort of reddish areas represent the British Empire at its height. By 1922, the British Empire held sway over a population of about four hundred and fifty-eight million people (one quarter of the world's population) and covered more than thirteen million square miles (again, about a quarter of the earth's land mass). At the peak of its power it was often said that the sun never sets on the British Empire because its span across the globe ensured that somewhere the sun was shining on part, at least one, of its numerous territories.

But as amazing as the British Empire was, so far, the world's largest empire, the British Empire is destined not to remain the greatest empire. There are two others that remain that will be much larger. One of them will be by God's arch enemy during the period of the Tribulation, and the

other is the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ. And Jesus tells us about the amazing growth of His own kingdom in our study of Mark tonight.

Following pretty closely on the heels of the Parable of the Soils, Jesus taught parables that focused on the seed. We looked last time at the Parable of the Growing Seed in verses 26-29. And let me just briefly remind you that as we looked at that, we saw the sower's activity in verse 26. Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is like a man who casts [his] seed upon the soil." And it's a mystery how it grows. This is a description of the growth of the seed of the Gospel in each individual heart. Jesus is playing off of the Parable of the Soils. And here He's explaining how the seed of the Gospel ends up bearing fruit in eternal life in the good soil, the good heart in which it falls; how the Word works in those hearts that are prepared to receive it. And it's a mystery. We can't understand how it grows. Verse 27 says, and the man who sows the seed "Goes to bed at night and gets up by day, [And he does this again and again.] and the seed sprouts and [it] grows—how, he himself does not know." We can't fully comprehend the work of God in the human heart, even as you heard the testimonies in baptism tonight. We can't understand how God uses His Word in the heart, but He does. It grows. It sprouts and grows. We certainly can't make it grow. Verse 28, "The soil produces crops by itself."

The point of Jesus parable is the farmer has nothing to do with the growth: he can watch it, he doesn't fully understand it, but he certainly can't make it grow. And in verse 20:28 he goes on to say that it grows slowly, at times even imperceptibly. He says, "First the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head." This is a many-month process with the wheat in Galilee that we talked about. This whole process takes many months, and at times the observer might wonder if there ever will be a harvest.

But Jesus ends that parable with the harvest's certainty. Verse 29, "But when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come." It takes a lot of time to know what the harvest is going to look like. But eventually, Jesus says, when there's good wheat seed, and it falls in good soil, it will produce a harvest. Jesus' point is that when the true Gospel is sown in a heart that is prepared by God, that's good soil, eventually it will bear fruit in a harvest of righteousness in the life. So, this is in effect a promise that whenever the Word of God is

sown in good soil, it will produce a harvest.

Now tonight we come to (that's just a brief review). I apologize for those of you who are with us for the first time tonight. You really would had to have been here for a little more detail to pick up on all of that. But that brings us up to the final parable that we want to look at briefly tonight, the final parable in Jesus' teaching here in Mark. It's also based in an agricultural setting because that was the setting of the people whom He taught that day on the side of the Sea of Galilee. We've already seen the Parable of the Soils. And in the Parable of the Soils the point was, the condition of the soil determines whether the seed bears fruit or not. In other words, the condition of the heart determines whether the seed of the Gospel bears fruit in that heart or not. The emphasis in this parable is human responsibility.

The Parable of the Growing Seed that we just looked at, that we just reviewed together, the point in that parable is that the seed of the Word of God grows and ends up bearing fruit in eternal life in that good soil through a process that is an absolute mystery to us. We don't understand it, but we sow. We simply are responsible to sow, and God produces the growth. The point here is divine sovereignty.

Tonight, we come to a third emphasis, still using the image of seed. But this time not the familiar wheat seed that they would've known, but a very specific kind of seed. We come to the Parable of the Mustard Seed. This parable occurs here and in the parallel passage in Matthew 13. Jesus gave the same parable several months later on an entirely different occasion, and that's recorded for us in Luke 13. Now here's how Mark records it in his account. Mark says in verse 30, notice what he says, "And He said, 'How shall we picture the kingdom of God, or by what parable shall we present it?'" Now remember, Jesus is standing in a boat or sitting in a boat on the edge of the Sea of Galilee just a short way off shore, anchored there, and the crowd has gathered on the edge of the sea.

I've been in that area where this happened, near Capernaum, the ancient city of Capernaum which was Jesus' hometown. And as He's teaching them, He's teaching them these parables, and later He explained them privately to His disciples back when they were in the house. But here

He's still teaching. He's on the boat, and He's going to yet another parable as the crowd is gathered there around Him. And He says to them, "How shall we picture the kingdom of God, or by what parable shall we present it?"

By the way, let me just make a little aside here. If you've been exposed at some point to the old dispensational idea that there is some difference between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven, maybe you've heard that, that they're not exactly the same, that's not true. And here's another passage that silences that idea. They are identical. Mark here, notice he says, "the kingdom of God." In the very parallel passage in Matthew, the same story, the same day, same account, Matthew calls it "the kingdom of heaven." Why? Well, because Matthew was writing to Jews, and the Jews preferred, as a practice, to avoid using the names of God as much as they could. So, as a kind of shorthand they would refer to "heaven" instead. It's like our expression "heaven knows." We don't mean the heavens know, we mean the person who is in heaven knows. That's how they used it. The point is God knows. This is used in the same way. The kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven mean exactly the same thing.

So, this parable, then, that Jesus is about to tell, communicates something about the spiritual kingdom over which Christ rules right now. He rules over the hearts of men and women who are His followers. That's His spiritual kingdom, and He's about to tell us something about that kingdom.

Jesus says, "[It's] ... like a mustard seed." This almost certainly refers to the black mustard plant. This is what it looks like. It grows in many places in the world today. According to Purdue University's information on various plants, this is cultivated for its seeds. It's a source of commercial table mustard, as a condiment, and as medicine. The seeds are used, the oil is used for a variety of things including (the oil is used for) lubrication as well as part of soap. In addition to that the leaves are sometimes used of this plant as well as a vegetable. On the Israeli government's site on agriculture, talking about this very plant, it says, "Leaves can be eaten raw or cooked. They have a hot flavor. They can be finely chopped and added to salads, cooked as sort of a green vegetable that you can use as a relish." It's also a major ingredient of curry. If you do a search for black mustard, you'll find a whole array of Indian food, because it's part of curry.

Throughout human history mustard has been used for a variety of medicinal purposes as well: from mustard plaster used externally to internal uses, the oil used for pneumonia and other things as well. So, it has been an herb that has been used down through history, and it was used in Jesus' time. It was a very common part of the first century life.

But why does Jesus, (after speaking in generic terms about seed, probably talking about wheat seed, but He doesn't say that) why does He suddenly get very specific? Well, it's because of one particular feature of the mustard seed. Look at verses 31 and 32,

“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....”

Jesus is using this particular plant because of the contrast. The contrast between its size as a seed versus what it becomes as a plant. It is the smallest of seeds that were familiar to them, but it became the largest of all the herbs that they used. Now, Jesus, by the way, here isn't saying that this is the smallest seed that exists anywhere in the world. That wouldn't've been correct; instead, this particular seed was used even in the Jewish writings to refer to something very, very small. It was like a proverbial way to refer to something infinitesimally small.

Jesus used it that way in Matthew 17:20. He said to His disciples, ... “Because of the littleness of your faith; for truly I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed [the smallest possible amount of faith], you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible [for] you.” So, it was kind of a proverb for something really, really small. In addition, it was the smallest seed that farmers and gardeners in the first century in Palestine had at their disposal. So, that's what He refers to.

This is what the seed looks like greatly enlarged. Amazing the detail in God's creation. This is it a little smaller, and this gives you some idea of its size. You'll notice at the bottom there's a measurement. That distance is point zero seven eight inches, and that gives you some idea of the seed. Here you see them in a man's hand. That gives you a little bit of the size of mustard seeds.

So, in verse 31 He says the kingdom of heaven is

“... like a mustard seed ...” which is so small it’s a proverb for something small,
“Yet when it is sown, it grows up and becomes larger than all the [other garden
herbs or] garden plants.”

The Israeli Government website on agriculture mentions that the mustard seed can be sown in the early spring, it can be sown all the way into late summer, and that way you sort of get a series of crops going. The main time to sow this plant for the best yield is in April. And if you do that, it’s harvested in the fall. And when the conditions are just right, the plants can reach up to ten feet tall. You’ll see a picture in a moment of a man standing with his hand up that shows a little bit of the size of it. In fact, let me just show you that. There you get, even today in Israel you can come upon stands of black mustard that are fairly tall. But certain species can even grow up to fifteen feet tall. In spite of its humble beginnings, it grows larger than all the other plants in its class.

As D. Edmond Hiebert, the commentator, writes, “Its small beginning did not doom it to insignificance.” In fact, the mustard plant becomes so large that notice what verse 32 says, “It ... forms large branches; so that THE BIRDS OF THE AIR can NEXT UNDER ITS SHADE.” Birds are attracted to mustard plants for two reasons: for the seeds and for the shade. The expression here doesn’t necessarily mean that the herb was big enough to build a nest. It might mean that, but it might also mean that the birds would simply find shade there in the heat of day the in the leaves, resting on the branches, picking at the seeds, and getting fed while they rested in the shade.

But don’t you think as you look at this parable that it’s a little odd of Jesus to use a garden variety herb to illustrate the growth of the kingdom? Why not an oak tree, an acorn to an oak tree? That’s a proverb that we have, isn’t it? Why not use something like that? Walt Kaiser writes,

“Using the mustard seed as a metaphor for the kingdom no doubt shocked Jesus’

audience who expected God's kingdom to be great and expansive in the Old Testament. It was described as a massive tree or a huge bolder, and Jesus says it's like a little mustard seed that grows into a common garden herb."

Why does Jesus do that? Because Jesus' main point is how insignificant and unimportant His spiritual kingdom appeared to people at that time. Think about what you would have seen in the first century. Imagine yourself as one of the spectators standing in the crowd that day in Galilee looking out at this rabbi teaching from the boat. Sure, there was a lot of interest, there were a number of people there, but think about the real situation without the benefit of two thousand years of church history. Jesus was merely an itinerant rabbi. He only had twelve full-time students, and He lived, and He taught primarily in the most unimportant part of His country, in Galilee. But even if you take the entire country into consideration (because eventually He would minister down in Judea, and He did minister there as well) even if you take the whole country into consideration, when you compare that with the scope of the Roman Empire, it was what? It was tiny. Jesus' influence was insignificant.

And if you compare Israel with the truly important places in the ancient world, places like Rome and Alexandria, Galilee was a backwater place in a backwater country. Jesus was, in the words of the prophet, a branch man from branch town. It's hard to imagine the mighty kingdom of the Son of God starting out any more humbly than that. So, if you're Jesus, how do you illustrate that kind of humble beginning? To what do you compare it? Jesus says, it's "like a mustard seed." It doesn't appear like much. It doesn't appear like it's going to accomplish much.

Notice that in the NAS, verse 32, the second part of the verse is in all capitals. That means that the translators believed that these words were taken from the Old Testament. Particularly, they reflect on a couple of Old Testament passages. One of them is Daniel 4. You remember in Daniel 4, Nebuchadnezzar has this dream, and in his dream he sees this tree, "Whose foliage was beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in [it] was food for all, under which the beasts of the field dwelt and in whose branches the birds of the sky lodged." This was to picture the expansive nature of Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom. It was huge, so the birds came and nested in this tree. The other references are in Ezekiel: Ezekiel 17:23. God says, "On the high mountain of Israel I

will plant it, that it may bring forth boughs and bear fruit and become a stately cedar. And birds of every kind will nest under it; they will nest in the shade of its branches.” Again, in Ezekiel 31, the same sort of image: 31:6. In Ezekiel’s case these passages prophesied that Messiah’s kingdom would grow so great and so large that it would include not only the Jews but Gentiles as well.

So, the illusion to birds back in our parable in Mark is either to describe the magnitude and size of the plant (It’s large enough that birds can come and find shade there and rest there.) or to give us the idea that Jesus’ kingdom would expand to be a blessing to the nations beyond Israel. Either of those may be why Jesus mentions the birds.

But the Parable of the Mustard Seed asks us to consider how weak and how insignificant the beginnings of Jesus’ kingdom really were. You picture those little seeds in that outstretched hand, that’s what it looked like if you had been a spectator in Israel. But look how large and great it grows in comparison to its beginnings. Jeremias, the great commentator, writes, “Out of the most insignificant beginnings invisible to human eyes, God creates His mighty kingdom which embraces all the peoples of the world.” That’s the parable.

Notice how Jesus finished this sermon. Actually, Mark finishes it in describing what Jesus did. Verse 33,

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.

So then, these parables that we’ve studied and even the ones in Matthew’s Gospel where there’re more of them are only a sampling of what Jesus taught from the boat that day. And these parables, as we’ve studied before, were at the same time an expression of God’s judgment, because the people weren’t prepared to really listen to the straight teaching of God’s Word so He taught in parables; and at the same time an expression of His grace, because it challenged them to think and reflect on these things. So, there’s Jesus’ teaching.

As we finish our time tonight, I want us to really reflect on why. Why did Jesus share the Parable of the Mustard Seed, and what are the implications for us? Why did Jesus give this parable? Well in the first century, everyone would have noted the extremely humble beginnings of the ministry of Jesus. Think about it for a moment. Just the same morning of these parables His enemies had written Him off. And certainly, in their minds they're thinking, who is this itinerant Galilee rabbi? He's not connected with the religious establishment at all, so we can certainly mistreat Him (as they did) and accuse Him of being in league with Satan. Those who were undecided about Jesus, those in the crowd who weren't sure whether He was or wasn't the Messiah, they would have been troubled by the insignificant humble beginnings of supposedly the Messiah's ministry. And even Jesus' friends and disciples would have wondered why, why their Messiah had come like this.

And so, Jesus gives this parable to help everyone see that the eventual success of His kingdom could not be evaluated by how things looked at any point in time until the growing is done. John Broadus, the American commentator during the time of the Civil War, out of Southern Seminary, writes this,

The disciples and other Jews clinging to the notion of a vast and splendid earthly kingdom would think it very strange that Messiah's reign should begin so quietly and on so small a scale. And in this parable and of that of the leaven, our Lord wishes to impress upon them that though small in its beginnings, His kingdom was destined to attain a vast extent. If the disciples were discouraged by the blasphemous accusations that morning when the Pharisees accused Him of being in league with Satan, and by the Parables of the Sower and Tares which indicated that only a few would really become subjects of Christ's kingdom, these two would reassure them.

Jesus was reassuring His own. In a sense, Jesus' words here were prophecy. They were prophecy. He was predicting that His kingdom would eventually become great and vast in comparison to its beginnings.

But to date, His prophecy has only been partially fulfilled. Even today (Certainly in the first century, as they heard Him there on the shore of Galilee, it was true.) but even today (and I want you to understand this), Jesus' kingdom is not what it will eventually be. In the flow of kingdom history there have been times that appear to be seasons of tremendous growth, and the people of God are encouraged. Think about it for a moment. Imagine what it would've been like to have lived in the first century, to have seen the Apostles teach, to have heard them teach, and to have seen the amazing spread and growth of Christianity. How exciting would that have been? And what about even the time of Constantine? While there was much that was done that wasn't for the good of Christianity, it would've been amazing to you to have seen a Roman emperor declare Christianity to be the state religion, to see the influence and the power that the kingdom of Christ had begun to exercise.

There were also dark and difficult times as well when you, if you look through the sweep of Christianity's history would have wondered if Christianity would even survive. You know when the first one was? It was in the New Testament. It's described in Galatians 2 when only Paul stood for the Gospel, when James and Peter and everybody else gave in to the Judaizers and accepted a false gospel, and Paul confronted Peter to his face. That was perhaps the darkest moment in the history of the church. Only one Apostle standing for the truth of the Gospel.

There would've been the Roman persecutions. Certainly, if you had lived in those days and watched as your friends and family were dragged off to be killed and tortured, it would've been difficult to have been a Christian. It would've been difficult to have watched the kingdom of God, the-the reign of Christ in the lives of people, go through that period of time. The Dark Ages with its medieval Catholicism, how hard would that have been? When the truth was locked up? When Luther, who was a monk, didn't *see* a Bible until he was in his twenties.

Let me make this very personal. If you've been alive any time at all, you have seen the fluctuations in the growth of Christ's kingdom. You have seen good times, and you have seen bad times. You saw the tremendous growth of the church in the sixties and seventies. You watched as the Jesus Movement—with its problems, yes, but also some genuine work of God

among it. Things looked good and healthy. There was interest in the Bible and Bible study, and things were taking off. But then in more recent years there've been a variety of movements that have made the church look far more unhealthy, a lot of things that are discouraging and even depressing. The prospect for the future of the church looks kind of low, doesn't it, at this point?

Now it's clear that there is no moral majority. There never was, but it's clear that there isn't; instead, we are part of the shrinking minority. But what I want you to see (And this is I think part of what Jesus wants us to understand.) is that none of those times, good times or bad times, are the end of the story. The plant isn't done growing. The kingdom is not yet what it will eventually be. But here's the good news: the end has been written. Jesus said it'll grow larger than all the other kingdoms of its kind, all the other plants of its kind, so that the birds of the air will nest under it. It's going to be mammoth before it's done, when Revelation describes that around the throne of God there will gather myriad upon myriads of people from every tongue and tribe and nation all praising the same Lord, praising the same Savior.

Let me take you to an Old Testament text that makes this point. Turn back to Daniel. Look at Daniel 2. You remember Nebuchadnezzar's dream? He dreams about the successive kingdoms of the world. He sees this image with a head of gold and all the different components of it, and each of those parts represents a successive world kingdom, world empire. And he's the head of gold. You remember at the very end of that image something happens? Look in verse 31. Here's the king's dream. Let me read it for you.

“You, O king, were looking [Daniel says] and behold, there was a single great statue; that statue, which was large and of extraordinary splendor, was standing in front of you, and its appearance was awesome. The head of that statue was made of fine gold, its breast and its arms of silver, its belly and its thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of clay.” [Now again, those are a successive series of world kingdoms, each less polished, but each more brutal and powerful.] [And] Then he says in verse 34, “You continued looking until a stone was cut out without hands, and it struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and crushed them. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were crushed all at the same time and became like chaff from the summer threshing

floors; and the wind carried them away so that not a trace of them was found. But the stone that struck the statue became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.”

What does that mean? Well, it’s explained for us. He explains the kingdoms, verse 36, let me tell you “its interpretation.” He explains all of the kingdoms that will come. But notice when he gets to that stone, verse 44,

“In the days of those kings [described by the feet and legs] the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed, and *that* kingdom will not be left for another people; it will crush and put an end to all these kingdoms, but it will itself endure forever. Inasmuch as you saw [the] stone was cut out of the mountain without hands and that it crushed the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver and the gold, the great God has made known to the king what will take place in the future; so the dream is true and its interpretation is trustworthy.”

You know what Daniel was saying? He was saying that all of the world kingdoms would continue to grow. They will become and have become increasingly more democratically oriented in a sense, less polished, but more powerful. Someday, a stone cut out of the mountain without hands (implying the work of God) just a stone, will come and absolutely crush every world kingdom. Not one will remain. It says they’ll be—not a trace of them was found. The wind carried them away; they were like chaff from the summer threshing floors. That’s how sturdy the kingdoms of the world are, but that stone that crushes them will grow into a great mountain and fill all the earth.

You know what’s that’s a message of? It’s a message of the reality that the spiritual kingdom we’re a part of now, the kingdom of Christ that we enjoy (It looks weak at times, fledgling, like it’s not a major influence on the world stage.) someday it will crush all earthly kingdoms. And it will become a political kingdom, because our Lord will come and set up His reign and reign with a rod of iron. And His kingdom will fill the whole earth. Listen, whatever the current state of the kingdom of God might look like to you right now (whether it’s going pretty well or whether

is not going very well) don't worry. Don't worry about it. Don't forget that though it may look very small and weak and spindly and insignificant right now, eventually the kingdom of which we are a part will fill the whole world. It will put an end to every other kingdom. We are a part, as the writer of Hebrews says, of a "... kingdom which cannot be shaken." The next time you're tempted to be discouraged about the state of the kingdom of God in the world, the state of the church in the world, remember the mustard seed. It starts really small and insignificant. It looks pretty small and spindly as it's growing, but it's not done growing yet.

Let's pray together.

Father, thank You for the encouragement that our Lord gives us in this great parable.

Lord, help us to take comfort and confidence in the fact that Your work in the world may ebb and flow. There may be times of great progress and revival, and there may be times of great darkness and trouble, even like in the times of the New Testament when only one man stood against damning error.

Father, help us to remember that our Lord promised that He would build His church and that He would expand His kingdom and that it would start small and insignificant (an itinerant rabbi in a backwater part of a backwater country), but it would eventually grow to include people from all over the world.

And someday, our Father, we look forward to the day when the spiritual kingdom of which we are a part now, as we have submitted ourselves to Christ and to His rule in our lives, Lord, we look forward to the day when He returns and takes back what is rightfully His; establishes His literal, political kingdom in the world, and will reign over this earth as its rightful king. And His kingdom will fill the whole earth. Father, we look forward to that day.

Until then, keep us faithful. And Father, keep us from discouragement: remembering that the story isn't done, the plant hasn't finished its growing.

We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.