

Growing Seed and Mustard Seed

Mark 4:26-32

Turn to Mark 1. Our two parables are in Mark 4, but first we'll look at something in Mark 1. When Jesus began his public ministry, people had questions about him. In simple terms it was this: "you preach the kingdom of God, Jesus of Nazareth, but what you're doing does not look like the kingdom. How can you say this is the kingdom of God?"

Jesus' sower and seed parables answer different sides of that question. And the question is similar in our day. Many people tell us what is wrong with the church and what is wrong with believers. And there is enough truth in what they say, for sure. It does not look like the kingdom.

These parables give us perspective that we need, and encouragement, that even though what we see does not seem to be the kingdom of God, it is.

Mark 1:14 *After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God.* ¹⁵ "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"

"The time has come, the time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near, it has arrived." If that was true, what *should* have happened was that the Roman armies should have been chased out of Judea by the end of the week, and chased out of Rome by the end of next week, and then God's judgment would take place on earth and the Messiah would rule.

If the time has been fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, that's what should have happened. But what actually happened?

¹⁶ *As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen.* ¹⁷ "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." ¹⁸ *At once they left their nets and followed him.*

Most of our Bibles have a new heading above v16, and we lose the connection between v15 and v16 because we assume it is now a different story. But it is not a different story. Jesus walking by the sea, and calling a pair of tradesmen to follow him, that's how the kingdom of God arrives.

And that is why people said, "You preach the kingdom of God, Jesus of Nazareth, but what you're doing does not look like the kingdom. How can you say this is the kingdom of God?"

Sceptics and devout alike asked that question. Even John the Baptist, in Herod's prison, wondered about this. "Are you the one," he asked Jesus, "or should we expect another?" John's asking that question. It is a fair question. We will look at two parables in Mark 4, which Jesus told to explain the kingdom of God, and to answer these questions.

Mark 4:26 - *Jesus also said, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. ²⁷ Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. ²⁸ All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. ²⁹ As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”*

The Puzzled Farmer? The Carefree Farmer? This is not an easy parable to sort out, at least I did not find it easy. Interpreters have made three different parts of this story the main idea. One is the man. After he plants he does nothing, the seed grows and develops, and the man does not know how it happens.

It does not say the man did nothing during that summer, and it does not say he was carefree. We can't use things it does not say to explain the parable. He might have been doing other things, and he might have worried about the crop.

The NIV says, “night and day, *whether* he sleeps *or* gets up, the seed sprouts and grows.” The words “whether” and “or” are not in Greek. It is just “night and day, he sleeps and gets up, and the seed sprouts and grows.” The word “whether” makes it sound like the emphasis is on the man doing nothing.

What if we put “while” in there: “night and day, *while* he sleeps and gets up, the seed sprouts and grows.” Then the emphasis would be on time passing. *As time passes the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how.* This sense is more likely, if we take “whether” and “or” out of there. As time passes and seed sprouts and grows, though he knows not how.

What it does say is that time passes, and the seed sprouts and grows, and the man does not know how. He does not cause the growth, and he does not know how growth happens, that much is clear. That is probably all we should say about the farmer: he does not cause the growth, and he does not know how it happens.

The Growing Seed? *Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, **the seed sprouts and grows**, though he does not know how.* So perhaps the emphasis is on the seed. It is impressive, it seems to have a life of its own, which all seeds have. It does not matter what the man does, the seed itself is the remarkable thing. Then the parable would be show that the kingdom of God was like potent seed, which produced growth no one understands.

The Fruitful Soil? V28 says, “***all by itself the soil produces grain.***” That is another possible focus, the fruitful soil. The soil is productive and fertile, could that be what Jesus had in mind?

No, the meaning of the parable is not in any one of these, it is in all of them together. The parable is an analogy, a story that teaches a lesson. The farmer is not Jesus, and he is not a preacher, the seed is not the gospel and it is not people. That is treating the parable like an allegory, and we only do that when Jesus or the context says so clearly.

The whole process of scattering seed and then mysterious grown and then harvest *as soon as* the grain is ripe, that whole process is what the kingdom is like.

Two important phrases are that growth happens “*though he does not know how.*” And “*all by itself*” the soil produces grain. First, and all the seed parables make this point, the kingdom is like a crop, it starts with seeds planted, and ends in harvest. The kingdom of God works like that.

If we are followers of Christ, then we are part of the kingdom of God, and that is what we are in. The basic teaching is not that any one of us are like seed, or any one of us like soil, or like farmers. The basic teaching is that the kingdom is like this: it starts with seeds planted, there’s a time of growth, and it ends in harvest. All these parables build on that.

What Jesus began, by preaching and by calling disciples, will certainly lead to kingdom harvest. It will take time, growth will not happen mostly by upheavals, that is not how crops grow, but what Jesus started will inevitably lead to all the fullness of the kingdom of God.

We do not cause the real growth, and we do not understand how that growth happens. God’s purposes are taking place, and *the kingdom grows by forces outside human knowledge and outside human control.*

Believers do not *bring* the kingdom, and we do not *cause* the kingdom. Rather, we *serve* the kingdom. The man did what a farmer should do, he planted seed, at the end he harvested the grain. But he did not cause the growth, and he did not cause the harvest. Nor did he understand the growth, or how seed became harvest. The kingdom of God is like that.

It is an encouraging parable. Let’s live our ordinary lives, day in and day out, going to bed at night, and getting up in the morning. Love God, and love people. Live in simple obedience to the Lord. Follow Jesus.

The growth and harvest of the kingdom of God does not rest on our doing great things for God. The growth and the harvest depends on God, and we have the good fortune to be caught up in the kingdom of God, and carried along by it.

Now we will look at the next parable, the mustard seed.

The Parable of the Mustard Seed (Mark 4:30-32)

In Mark these two parables come right after the other, and are sort of a pair. They do not say exactly the same thing, but similar enough that we will do both today.

Matthew and Luke both have the parable of the mustard seed paired with the parable of the leaven. Mark does not have the parable of the leaven, and Mark is the only one who records the growing seed, which we just covered. Since most of our parables will come from Matthew or Luke, and since Mark is the only one with the growing seed, and he joins it to the mustard seed, I decided to go with Mark this week.

³⁰ Again he said, “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? ³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. ³² Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.”

Jesus was still answering the same basic question, from both believers and doubters: “Jesus of Nazareth, you preach that waiting is over, the kingdom of God has arrived, but what you are doing does not look like the kingdom. How can what you are doing be the kingdom of God?” It was a big question in Jesus’ life, and he answered it, and we need to know how he answered it.

I looked up mustard plants online. The seeds are small. Of the seeds I have handled, which are not many, carrot seeds are the smallest, and mustard seeds are considerably smaller than carrot seeds.

In a season the mustard plant grows to be about as tall as corn or sunflower, as tall as a man or a little more. But there were also pictures of mustard trees, and I gather that if one does not harvest it in fall, lets it grow instead, it becomes something the size of a fruit tree.

The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. ³² Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.”

Jesus made such big claims about what he was doing, that the time was fulfilled and the kingdom had arrived; yet what he did was so small, so unimpressive, and so *not* like what true followers of God expected. How can something so puny and meagre, be the kingdom of God?

Every knew what Jesus was doing was not the kingdom in its power. Even Jesus agreed with that. The question this parable answers: Could what Jesus was doing even turn into the mighty kingdom of God, or will God’s kingdom come a different way, John the Baptist’s question?

By the mustard parable, Jesus says, “Yes, this small start that you see, this will turn into the great kingdom of God in all its power. What everyone knows and longs for is already beginning, it is now at work. Birds in the shade of its branches – the end will be enjoyable and wonderful.”

Jesus was educating them about eschatology, and he’s educating us also. What he started is the beginning, like planting seed and the beginning of a crop, and it will produce a harvest.

The whole age between Jesus’ first coming and second coming is one long growing season. Both parables we read today teach that. We live somewhere in that growing season.

What we have not usually realized is that the beginning of the next age is the harvest of this age. That is consistently the image Jesus uses. This age does not simply end, when Jesus returns, and the next age begins.

When this age ends, the kingdom growth of this age is gathered together, it is harvested. What exactly is gathered? Is it people themselves? Yes, and more. Is it all the faithful obedience of God's people? Yes, that too.

We ourselves, and our daily obedience to the Lord, all the love we have shown, and our prayers, and our worship, and hanging on to the Lord in testing, all this and more is that harvest that God gathers, and that the next age celebrates and enjoys.

I am speculating here. What I know for sure is that for Jesus, the end of this age is consistently a time of harvest. Harvest ends this age and begins the next. What I'm not sure about is what exactly is harvested, but I assume it to be the total of what he urged people to do.

And you will say, and if that is kingdom growth, then people do cause it after all. But the Scriptures say, not so fast. Listen to these Scriptures, and consider that kingdom growth comes from God.

I am confident that he who began a good work in you [i.e. God] will carry it on to completion for the day of Christ Jesus (Php 1:6). It is God who works among you to will and to act to fulfill his good purpose (Php 2:13).

May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will blameless and holy when our Lord Jesus comes (1 Thess 3:12-13).

May God himself, the God of peace, make you holy through and through. May your whole spirit, soul, and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it (1 Thess 5:23-24). See also Eph 3:20-21; 2 Thess 2:16-17; Heb 13:20-21; and Jude 24-25.

This obedience on our part does not happen without our own choices, of course. The point is that our choices are not enough. God gives us the ability to choose and act. In that way kingdom grown is God's doing.

The end of this age is the harvest, the gathering, of the kingdom growth of this age. The first parable teaches that we do not cause the growth of the kingdom, and we do not understand it.

We serve the kingdom, but God causes the growth in ways we cannot grasp. Because God is doing this, the growth of the kingdom into harvest is inevitable.

This kingdom work God is doing on earth now will become that kingdom which he promised, as surely as a growing season ends in harvest.

That parable is not about individual acts of planting, by which I mean acts of obedience to the Lord, doing the right thing in different parts of daily life. Both parables are Jesus teaching the big picture, and by doing that they encourage us.

The church is much bigger now than it was when Jesus began, but claims that the kingdom of God is present may be even harder to believe now than they were in Jesus' time. But we can still know that in spite of what it looks like, Jesus set the kingdom of God in motion and it will certainly reach its goal. The crop will ripen and there will be harvest.

The parable does suggest though that our individual acts of planting, our daily obedience to the Lord, will produce their own harvest, will produce results, in ways we do not cause or understand. There is that secondary sense to these parables.

And the mustard seed parable does not teach us that each time we do some act of planting, it will turn into something great and wonderful. The mustard seed parable is about the whole kingdom, beginning as a mustard seed and ending as a sheltering tree.

But again, the parable does correct how we might see things that are small and insignificant. They might really be small, and yet yield huge results.

William Carey, the famous missionary, said: "Expect great things from God, attempt great things for God." My first Bible college made sure I heard that many times. The Mustard Seed parable would say it this way: "*Expect great things from God, keep doing small things for God.*"

The whole time between Jesus' first coming and Jesus' second coming is one long growing season, seed planted, then sprouting and growing, then the crop ripening, and harvest comes at Jesus' return. That's the first stage of the kingdom. The second stage is enjoying the harvest, from Jesus' return and on from there.

The growth comes from God, we do not make it happen or understand it. So be patient, and let's love God and our neighbour, and be encouraged. What Jesus began will certainly and inevitably become the fullness of God's kingdom. It began very small, and will end huge and wonderful.

Paul ends a teaching on the coming harvest like this: Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, let's stand firm. Let's not allow anything to shake us. Let's always give ourselves fully to serving the Lord, because we know that our labour in the Lord is not in vain. Amen. (1 Cor. 15:58)