

## Mark 4:26–34

<sup>26</sup> He said, “This is how it is with the kingdom of God; it is as if a man were to scatter seed on the land  
<sup>27</sup> and would sleep and rise night and day and the seed would sprout and grow, he knows not how. <sup>28</sup> Of its own accord the land yields fruit, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. <sup>29</sup> And when the grain is ripe, he wields the sickle at once, for the harvest has come.” <sup>30</sup> He said, “To what shall we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable can we use for it? <sup>31</sup> It is like a mustard seed that, when it is sown in the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on the earth. <sup>32</sup> But once it is sown, it springs up and becomes the largest of plants and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the sky can dwell in its shade.” <sup>33</sup> With many such parables he spoke the word to them as they were able to understand it. <sup>34</sup> Without parables he did not speak to them, but to his own disciples he explained everything in private.

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## Context

Apart from the Olivet Discourse in Mark 13:3–37, the sacred author’s grouping of parabolic material in Chapter 4 constitutes the largest unit in his Gospel devoted entirely to the teaching of Jesus. Included are three parables of growth: the sower (Ch. 4:3–8), the growth of the seed (Ch. 4:26–29) and the mustard seed (Ch. 4:30–32). Each of the three reflects upon sowing, growth and harvest-elements which illumine the character of the Kingdom of God signaled by Jesus’ presence among them. Yet there is a climate of unbelief that swirls around Jesus: many simply do not appreciate Jesus, the Jewish leadership seems bent upon destroying him (3:6), and he has been accused of forming an alliance with Beelzebul (3:22). Still, the parables not only reflect the situation all about Jesus, more importantly they point to the inevitable and ultimate triumph of the Kingdom of God.

There is certainly a great deal that can be said about Jesus’ use of parables, but as William Lane [151] points out, especially in the agricultural parables, Jesus is pointing out that the natural order and the life of people is intrinsically like the redemptive order of God. That is not to say merely analogical, but a real correlation because both arise from the purpose of God – both reflect God’s intention and desire

Chapter 4 of Mark contains some very memorable parables:

- Parable of the Sower (vv.1-9)
- Purpose of the Parables (vv.10-20)
- Parable of the Lamp (vv.21-25)
- Parable of the Seed that Grows Itself (vv.26-29)
- Parable of the Mustard See (vv.30-34)

One notable feature of this Markan chapter occurs in early in the chapter when Jesus begins the parable with “*Hear this! A sower went out to sow...*” (v.3) and then closes the teaching with “*Whoever has ears to hear ought to hear.*” (v.9) While ending a parable with a plea to discern is typical of the presentation of many parable, the doublet that bookends the first parable of Mark 4 is highly unusual when compared to the traditional Jewish presentation of the *masahal*/parable. Most scholars take this doublet as an expression that in the hands of Jesus, parables were intended to provoke thought, and were not the transparent illustrations they are sometimes supposed to have been. While this can also be said of the contemporary Jewish use of parables, there is perhaps a dual purpose. First, not only to provide a depth that separates the Spirit-led discerns from the merely curious, but, secondly, to provide an intended degree of obfuscation to investigating Jewish authorities.

After the opening parable of the seed and its explanation (vv.1-20), Mark records five other parables that are meant to enable his audience to take Jesus' word to heart more personally and more profoundly. By the Parable of the Lamp, Mark suggests that his readers will have to ponder the meaning of Jesus' life and message much more thoroughly for themselves before they can share it fully with others (vv. 22–23). The parable-like saying about getting back “in the measure you give” (v. 24) is much like the preceding parable about the lamp. Mark's readers must continuously grow in their understanding of Jesus for themselves, or they will lose what they think they possess. The Parable of the Seed that Grows Itself (or perhaps, the sleeping farmer) (vv. 26–29) sets aside any illusion that the growth of God's kingdom is somehow indelibly tied to the efforts of any one people. The last parable of chapter 4 is also about a seed, the smallest of all seeds, the mustard seed (vv. 30–32). Even though the early Christian community was small in number, this parable assures Mark's readers that all their efforts will be fruitful in the growing kingdom of God — if they will just understand (see vv. 33–34)

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## Commentary

Mark alone records the parable of the “**Seed that Grows Itself**”

<sup>26</sup> He said, “This is how it is with the kingdom of God; it is as if a man were to scatter seed on the land <sup>27</sup> and would sleep and rise night and day and the seed would sprout and grow, he knows not how. <sup>28</sup> Of its own accord the land yields fruit, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. <sup>29</sup> And when the grain is ripe, he wields the sickle at once, for the harvest has come.”

Place beyond the parable of the Sower (vv.1-9) and its explanation, it is easy for the significance of this to be lost in the fast-paced narrative of Mark's gospel. In the parable of the Sower, the meaning of the interim time before the fruits appear has a positive sense: the time of waiting is a time for sowing, an opportunity for seed to be scattered in the field. There is also a teaching that in that interim period there will be barriers, resistance, and problems encountered in the sowing of the seed as it comes to fruition.

As in the earlier parable, the sower is not involved with the subsequent growth of the seed. It grows and produces “of itself” (v. 28). As soon as ripe grain appears, the sower comes to harvest the crop. The identity between the sower and the harvester is emphasized in the return of the sower for harvest. There can be no doubt that the harvest is the coming judgment of the world, for the concluding words of v.29 reflect Joel 4:13: *Apply the sickle, for the harvest is ripe; Come and tread, for the wine press is full.* Some commentaries wonder about the strangely passive sower perhaps asking too much of a parable to provide the fullest possible description so that there is the fullest possible explanation available to the reader/listener. Of course that rather defeats the purpose of the parable. In any case, this parable is consistent with the previous warnings to ensure that faith increases.

The stress in the parable falls less upon the identification of the “passive sower” as God, but more on the sowing of the seed as a messianic work which unleashes mysterious forces operating of themselves in the achievement of the purposes of God. For the attentive listener, this parable highlights Jesus' mission and what is to be expected. Jesus' work was sowing; only after a certain lapse of time will there be the gathering of the harvest. The period between sowing and harvest, however, is not insignificant; for in that period *something happens*.

In this connection there occur some remarkable expressions. Clearly in v. 27, the seed germinates and sprouts; it springs up and matures in a mysterious manner that goes almost unnoticed. This is the emphasis behind Mark's phrase “*he knows not how.*” It is clearly not by human intervention that the seed grows (v.28); the earth produces fruit “spontaneously.” Mark's use of the rare word ἀὐτομάτῃ is deliberate, and reflects on the characteristics of growth.

This does not mean that the sower abandons his work, nor that he is uninterested in what takes place, for this is not the point in the reference to his sleeping and rising. It means that the seed must be allowed its appointed course, as the process of growth and ripening advances toward a harvest that is approaching.

The sower takes account of the growth of the seed, but he cannot fully understand it. His ultimate interest is in the purpose for which the seed was sown—the harvest; when the grain is ripened, he immediately sends forth the sickle into the grain. These expressions exhibit aspects of the mysterious manifestation of the Kingdom of God in history. It comes mysteriously, by God's initiative and appointment, without human intervention.

### **The Parable of the Mustard Seed**

<sup>30</sup> He said, "To what shall we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable can we use for it? <sup>31</sup> It is like a mustard seed that, when it is sown in the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on the earth. <sup>32</sup> But once it is sown, it springs up and becomes the largest of plants and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the sky can dwell in its shade." (Mark 4:40-42)

Of the three parables of seed which is sown the last is most elaborately introduced in explicit parabolic formulation: the Kingdom of God is like what happens to a grain of mustard. The mustard seed was proverbial in Jewish thinking as the smallest of all seeds. Mark's explanatory phrase, "*when it is sown in the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on the earth*" may be understood as a gloss to inform his readers in the West of this underlying assumption. Unlike the previous parable, there is no real reflection upon the actual growth of the seed. All attention is focused upon the contrast between the smallest of the seeds and the tallest of the shrubs. By the Lake of Gennesaret, the mustard shrub attains the height of eight to ten feet. The birds are attracted by the seed and the shade.

But notice that the Kingdom is not likened to the mustard seed, but to what happens to the mustard seed. The whole life of the plant provides the basis of the comparison. The reference to the birds of the air which find shelter in the branches of the mustard shrub may have a deeper significance. Echoes of the OT may be responsible for this formulation; the LXX of Ezek 17:23 has birds "under its shade" rather than "in the shade" of the tree.

Matthew 13:31–32 and Luke 13:18–19 represent another version of the parable in which a person sows the seed, which grows into a tree. The shade or shelter provided by the bush has been replaced by the branches as a place for the birds to make their nests. This variant highlights the OT use of great trees to depict the kingdoms of the world (Ezek 17:23; 31:6; Dan 4:12, 20–22). The great tree in Dan 4:20–22 corresponds to a kingdom that rules all the peoples of the world. The image of a mighty cedar of Lebanon symbolizes Assyria (Ezek 31:2) and Judah (Ezek 17:3–4). Thus it must have seemed contradictory to use the image of a bush to represent the kingdom of God. Changing the image for the kingdom from a bush to a tree (Mt and Luke) emphasizes that the kingdom of God is greater than all human kingdoms.

In order to explain how the bush provides shelter for all the birds of the air, Mark observes that the full-grown bush has large branches. Even when fully grown, the kingdom of God does not appear unusually large if it is compared to great trees. Yet, as bushes go, the mustard bush is the greatest. Birds that nest on the ground are sheltered by its branches. Jesus may have told this parable to counter the impression that God's rule had to appear among the great and powerful. It may have been an expression of God's providence in creation (Ps 104:12; Matt 6:26–30).

Mark uses the parable to conclude the discourse on parables. The certainty with which small mustard seeds take over the tilled soil into which they fall contrasts with the precariousness of the seed scattered by the sower and the mysterious appearance of the harvest from the seed that grows of itself.

The overtones of divine judgment attached to the harvest in the two earlier parables are also missing. Thus this parable suggests that the secret of the kingdom of God can be found by Jesus' disciples in their present experience. God has already provided protection for the faithful. The next episode, a rescue at sea, joins the Christology of Mark with the certainty of God's protection for suffering disciples. Jesus makes God's salvation present just as his preaching announces the coming of God's rule.

This parable is concerned with the enigmatic present manifestation of the Kingdom as embodied in Jesus' person. Its appearance may be characterized by weakness and apparent insignificance—but remember the mustard seed. The day will come when the Kingdom of God will surpass in glory the mightiest kingdoms of the earth, for it is the consequence of God's sovereign action. The mustard seed is the word of God proclaimed by Christ. This word possesses the power which one day will make all things new. When the glory of that manifestation breaks forth before all they will be as startled as the one who considers the tiny mustard seed and the mighty shrub.

### **The Word and Private Interpretation.**

<sup>33</sup> *With many such parables he spoke the word to them as they were able to understand it.* <sup>34</sup> *Without parables he did not speak to them, but to his own disciples he explained everything in private.* (Mark 4:32-34)

Mark concludes this collection of parables with a summary indicating that he has selected illustrations of Jesus' teaching from a much larger cycle of tradition. It was Jesus' method to teach the people through parables such as the one which Mark has presented. Through these parables Jesus is proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom; in other words, He was proclaiming "the word." The term is an echo of the explanation given to the parable of the sower, where it occurs eight times. It is appropriate to the vocabulary of revelation and means clearly "the word of God," or more concretely "the word of the Kingdom." The motive for Jesus' use of the parables is expressed in terms of his accommodation to that stage of preparation which was present in the crowd; he spoke the word "*as they were able to understand it.*" This means that he adapted it to the level of understanding that he found in his listeners. Had Jesus spoken to the crowds in a direct manner they would have been forced to make a decision immediately. That decision could have expressed only unbelief and rejection. Jesus' adoption of the indirect address of the parable was accordingly an expression both of grace and of judgment. It was an expression of grace which allowed time for reflection on his appeal to penetrate beneath his words to "the word." It was an expression of judgment upon their lack of preparation to receive directly the word of the Kingdom of God. For that reason "*he did not speak to them without a parable.*"

With Jesus' parables before the people the evangelist contrasts his private exposition of "*everything*" to his own disciples. "*Everything*" within this context means more than parabolic utterance; it refers to the mission of Jesus in which the mystery of the Kingdom was veiled. The summary, accordingly, points back to the contrast developed in Ch. 4:11–12 and exhibits the two aspects of the revelation of God in the mission of Jesus. There was *veiling* (or very partial disclosure) before the multitude and *disclosure* (but only partial understanding) to the disciples. This is the pattern illustrated in Ch. 4 and assumed throughout the Gospel of Mark. In the private instruction which Jesus gives to his disciples, the mystery of the Kingdom as present in his person is graciously unveiled. Only through revelation does the enigma become partially resolved; not until the consummation (to take the perspective of the parables) will it become resolved for all men.

**Final Reflections.** The scholar PHEME PERKINS [579] offers these reflections on this Markan passage.

"The seed parables point to the certain harvest that stems from next-to-invisible beginnings. The lack of human agency during the growth process does not mean that disciples should sit

back and wait for God to bring the harvest. The proverbial sayings on how faith increases warn against such a conclusion. Instead, the image of a certain harvest from invisible beginnings promises that even though our testimony to the gospel appears insignificant or even fruitless, Christians should not be discouraged or give up. Christians should beware of giving in to the mania for statistics as evidence of success, which dominates modern life. When the harvest is ripe, it will be time for the reaper.”

“The image of a mustard bush as the kingdom of God set over against the alternative vision of the nations as great trees points to another feature of God’s rule. The kingdom does not replicate the kind of greatness that human nations attempt to build for themselves.”

“The passivity of human figures during the growth process challenges a common reading of these parables. They do not describe an evolutionary process by which Christians build the kingdom. The proverbial sayings warn Christians that faith cannot remain private. We must give away what we have received. This evangelical emphasis counters a common modern tendency to think of religion as a matter of private preference that is best worn lightly in the presence of others. These proverbs and parables suggest that God does not give the gift of faith (or secret of the kingdom) to individuals as their private possession. Rather, the gift provides light for others and shelter for the birds of the field.”

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