

Mark 4:21-34 - God will grow the harvest

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[0 : 00] Now Daisy's going to come and read God's word for us and then David's going to preach. So Daisy, over to you. So we're going to be reading Mark 4 from verse 21 on page 1006.

He said to them, Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don't you put it on its stand? For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open.

If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear. Consider carefully what you hear, he continued. With the measure you use, it will be measured to you, and even more.

Whoever has will be given more. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. He also said, This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground, night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how.

All by itself, the soil produces corn, first the stalk, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. As soon as the corn is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.

[1 : 12] Again he said, What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth.

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. With many similar parables, Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand.

He did not say anything to them without using a parable, but when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything. David. Thanks, Daisy.

Thanks, everyone. Again, David, I'm one of the leaders, and I've got the pleasure of sharing with you all today. So let me just pray before we get started, all right? Father, thank you so much for bringing us together this morning, for waking us up, giving us the opportunity to open your word, to read it, to consider what it has for us.

Father, I pray that you would give us understanding, that you would open our minds and our hearts to see what you have, to know what you're telling us, to listen and to accept it as truth and beneficial to our lives.

[2 : 27] Lord, would you move in this room this morning, bring us closer to you and to one another. In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. Well, thanks again.

I'm excited to be up here. So as Daisy read, we're reading in Mark chapter 4, verses 21 to 34, and it contains these three little parables, the lamp on the stand, the parable of the growing seed, and the parable of the mustard seed.

And this passage, these parables, they're confusing. They can be confusing. They certainly take more effort to understand than something that would be perfectly clear, perfectly laid out.

And Jesus, in the passage just before this, spoke of the concept of parables and why he speaks in parables, stating that the secret of the kingdom of God has been given to us, but to those on the outside, everything is said in parables, so that they may be ever seeing but not perceiving, ever hearing but not understanding.

Otherwise, they might turn and be forgiven. And that statement can be difficult to digest, or at least hard to understand initially, because it seems to suggest that there are some that aren't meant to understand, or aren't meant to hear what he has to say.

[3 : 51] And it raises some questions, and it should raise questions, right? I recently had a big contract to work on at work, and there were several lawyers involved, a whole team of lawyers on both sides.

And we would spend hours, literally hours, looking at clause by clause through this contract that was some 70-something pages long. It was not my favorite time.

And the whole contract is written by lawyers in legal language, I think intentionally so that the other lawyers are the only ones who can understand what's in there, right?

It must be how they keep the racket going and keep the bills getting charged. If any of you are lawyers, I apologize only slightly. But all of this legalese, if you will, like, I'd like to think of myself as a fairly smart individual, right?

That I understand what the words mean. I can look at words in a sentence and put those together and try to make sense of it. I can read those words. I can tell you what they mean. But when they're put together in this way, on this kind of document, they just make my brain want to shut down.

[5 : 00] I don't want to read it anymore. And sometimes it's a little bit like these parables, that you can read the words. You know what the words mean. You can see what it's saying, but the meaning is harder to see.

And so for the contract, I have to lean on and trust in the lawyers, my lawyer, to explain what it's saying. And then they're actually able to use plain language so that I can understand.

And they help me see what it says. And without their help, I can't understand anything. And part of what these parables are doing and what they're saying is that you won't be able to understand these on your own.

That's not the intention. You need an interpreter. And you need the Spirit of God to make these things clear. And so what we'll see today is Jesus is telling the crowd what's coming.

This is what these parables are. He's saying in these parables, what we'll see is that the kingdom of God is being revealed. And though it may not always look promising, it will gloriously prevail in the end.

[6 : 03] And so let's look at each of these parables. The first parable is this lamp on the stand. It says, Jesus asked, do you bring in a lamp and you put it under a bowl or a bed?

No, instead, don't you put it on a stand? And he explains that whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. And he adds, if anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.

And so this parable, in this parable, Jesus is talking about himself. Jesus is the lamp. Jesus is the light. And we see this in other places where Jesus is talking about himself.

In John chapter 8, Jesus says, I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. And so what he's saying is that something is being initiated in his coming.

It's a prophecy about what he has come to do. Jesus is saying, don't you realize the light has come? That God has sent his lamp into the world and this lamp is Jesus.

[7 : 13] He's the word of God. Literally the way we can understand God. Right? In the same way that we use words to articulate a thought or an idea, God is articulated to us in Jesus.

Right? This Jesus in whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden. We don't understand what God is doing until Jesus.

Right? The religious leaders of the day, they thought they understood what God was doing. They thought they had an idea of it. And so when they saw Jesus, they rejected him.

The disciples thought they understood what God was doing. They thought they understood why Jesus was there. But when Jesus would predict his death, they couldn't comprehend what he was up to.

God's plans had been hidden. But now, in Jesus, they're being brought into light. Just a couple chapters earlier in Mark 1, Jesus comes into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God by saying, the time has come.

[8 : 19] The kingdom of God is near. Repent. Repent. And believe. And this is the beginning of the revelation of the gospel, that the light has come, that the king has come to bring his kingdom.

And God will continue in that work until all the truths of the gospel and all the mysteries of the gospel have been revealed. And through the life of Jesus, the truths are being uncovered.

And in his death, in his death, God's true purposes are being revealed. And in the work of the Spirit through the apostles, what he had done was brought into clarity.

Right? This is what we have in the books from Romans to Revelation. It's God fulfilling the promise of understanding and fully uncovering the lamp of understanding.

And the lamp that's pictured in this parable, the lamp of the Spirit of Christ, it still operates. He still teaches.

[9 : 21] He still unfolds the mysteries of God to us. And he's come to unfold them so that we might understand, we might see him clearly. And that, so the veil would be lifted and that we can worship him.

And so how do you respond to that? First you listen, it says, let him hear. And then you respond. See, the reality is, some will hear Jesus teaching and they'll seek to understand.

And those are the ones described as the good soil in the chapter just before, the passage just before. And for those who seek to understand, God will give understanding. But some will hear Jesus' teaching and they won't seek to understand.

And they won't be bothered. Right? As we saw previously, for some, it's the pleasures of the world that keep them from understanding. For some, it's the worries of the world that keep them from seeking.

For some, it's the trouble and persecution that come from the world that keep us from seeking. And for some, it's the hardness of their heart that keeps us from hearing it all.

[10 : 33] Look, what it says here is, pay attention to what you hear. With the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Right? In your kitchen, I imagine we're all the same here.

In your kitchen, you have a variety of measuring tools. I brought one. This is the smallest one I could find. It's one quarter teaspoon. It's a very tiny amount. And this one isn't in my kitchen.

But this one's really large. This is a 30 liter jug. Right? And what Jesus is saying here is that if you seek one quarter teaspoon of understanding, then you'll receive one quarter teaspoon of understanding.

But if you seek a 30 liter jug of understanding, God promises to give you a 30 liter jug of understanding. Right? Do you see that? This is a theme in Mark.

It's happened already and it will carry on. But faith in God is not an intellectual exercise. Faith is an active thing that you have to step into.

[11 : 36] And if I grab a hold of the understanding that I have now and I live in the basis of the gospel, and as I do that, God continues to mature me. He continues to open my mind to the things that I didn't understand before.

And he continues to grow me in knowledge of what his word is saying. And the one who uses it, more will be given. And the one who doesn't listen, doesn't hear, what even he has will be taken away.

Sounds harsh at first, doesn't it? But actually, it's not as harsh as it initially sounds. Because what do we know? We know that everything that we have, our possessions, our success, our position, our status, our notoriety, even our health and our vibrancy, right?

Everything we have will be taken away at some point. For the unbeliever and for the believer, right? Everything will be taken away, but the knowledge and the understanding and our faith in Jesus Christ.

And those who hold that, it says, everything will be given. Right? As Jesus promised, he says, ask and it will be given to you.

[12 : 51] To the one who seeks, and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. And the one who seeks, finds. And to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

So maybe you're here today and you aren't quite sure what you believe. Maybe there's something about God, something about the Bible that you find hard, that you're not quite sure how to trust, how to put your faith in the God you think you see in that.

The question is, have you asked him to understand? Have you asked him to help you understand? God says, he promises, whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed.

It's not meant to be hidden from you. It's not meant to be a secret. He wants to show you. He wants to reveal it to you. Maybe you are a Christian here today. Maybe you genuinely believe, but there are things that seem murky, or not quite sure how to make sense of that bit or this bit.

Right? There are things that if you're pressed on them, you might struggle to articulate to someone and you might keep you from wanting to explain that to a friend. Ask God to reveal them to you.

[14 : 02] He certainly wants to. His intention is not for things to be hidden. He wants to show you. It would please him deeply for you to ask him.

And so the kingdom is at hand. The light of the world has come. And he is ready to reveal what the kingdom will be like. And so we hear, as Jesus continues in the next parable of the growing seed, he states, this is what the kingdom of God is like.

A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. The soil produces grain on its own.

First the stalk, then the head, and then finally the full kernel. And when the grain is ripe, the man puts the sickle to it, and the harvest has come. See, this parable is about the kingdom of God.

The kingdom that was ushered in as Jesus is the lamp into the world. And this shows what the kingdom of God is doing. The fact is, the kingdom of God is coming. And the kingdom of God is growing.

[15:10] Whether it looks like it or not, even when it feels like God is distant or inactive or asleep, the seed is growing. We may not understand how.

In fact, we certainly won't understand how. But it's producing grain. And one day, God will come and harvest that ripened crop. And even today, I venture to say, I want the gospel to be a straight line, a linear path with no curves or unexpected turns.

I want the chart of faith to go up and to the right forever. You're right. But we know from life it's not like that. We know from the Bible that's not how it works.

We struggle in our relationships as they go through ups and downs, sometimes growing healthily and other times it's a real challenge. We struggle with our children or grandchildren or nieces and nephews.

They grow and we might see glimpses of maturity and maybe even faith in them and then other times it seems like they're on a path that we have no idea how they got there. We struggle with it as we share or try to share the gospel with our friends.

[16:20] Sometimes they seem eager to hear and they're accepting of our invitation and sometimes it's like speaking to a wall. We struggle with it as we look at our church. Sometimes there are times of growth and health and other times it seems stagnant and tired.

we struggle as we look at the surrounding world. More often than not it seems like the culture is careening off into an abyss. We wonder if all of this planting is actually doing anything at all.

If the seed that we put in the soil will ever grow. If we'll ever look at the soil and see that bright green shoot popping up above the surface.

Or was it just a waste of time and energy? The temptation for us is this. We might feel like we need to do something.

Let me say that again. We might feel like we need to do something. We try to somehow manipulate the results. Like a novice gardener says maybe we should dig it back up and put the seeds in a different way.

[17:30] Maybe we should massage them a little bit. Maybe they're not quite ready. Maybe we should put just a bit more water on top. Maybe a little bit more. Maybe a little bit more. It doesn't work, does it?

And there's a tendency in the church to look at the results. To be centered and focused on the results. And if we aren't getting the results we want or think we should, we tend to think that we need to do something.

Maybe we need something that will be more attractive to people who don't know the gospel yet. Maybe we aren't being clear enough about sin and punishment. Maybe if a famous person or someone that people generally like would come to faith that would help people really understand. Maybe we need different music or we should sing different songs. Maybe we should stand here or there. Maybe we should go longer or shorter. Maybe we should start earlier or later. All of that, it's forgetting our place.

It's forgetting our role. It's forgetting our job. Because our job is to plant. Our job is to plant the seed and you see what it says here about the farmer?

[18:42] It's really humbling actually because it says this, he sleeps and rises night and day and the seed sprouts and grows and he has no idea how. He has nothing to do with the growth of the plant.

All he did was plant it in the soil and wait because the earth produces it by itself. Once you've planted the seed, you've done your job, everything else belongs to the Lord.

Why is it that sometimes someone will respond and another person right next to them hearing the same words, the same presentation of the gospel won't respond? Why is it that some people's growth seems rapid and others seem to grow so slowly?

Why is it that some churches seem to grow in numbers and explode in fruitfulness and others remain small? These are the mysteries of the kingdom of God. We're looking at the soil and wondering, is there ever going to be a shoot here?

Is it ever going to grow? How is this going to work? And so it's really important that we know our place, that we plant the seed and God grows the harvest. Right?

[19 : 50] You don't have to hold the harvest on your shoulders. We don't have to put it on us. It's not on us. Right? Parents, you have no capacity whatsoever to produce belief in your children.

Grandparents, the same. Right? You can't do it. Friends, you have no capacity to produce belief in the friend or colleague that you wish so much to come to faith. You have no ability.

I have no ability. Steve has no ability to argue a person into the kingdom of God. That's not how it works. So we have to know our place and we have to trust in God to do what he has promised to do.

It's not that we don't know what's going to happen. We actually know he's promised to do the work and so we can trust him to do it. Because even the harvest of our own hearts, God is still working. There's no moment where hope is lost, when it's been too long, you've come too many times and it just hasn't clicked yet. That's not how it goes. Even when it doesn't feel like it, God has been working to bring you to him.

[20 : 55] Wherever you are, if you've been a believer for a long time, if you've been a believer for a week or a day, there was a moment at which you thought, I don't know, it doesn't make sense. And then God, in his timing, brought you to him.

Maybe you've heard about Jesus before. Maybe you've sat in these seats for weeks and weeks and weeks and it hasn't ever quite sunk in. It's never made sense.

The reality is today could be the day of harvest for you. Today could be the day where you realize that you've been trying to make sense of the world on your own, but you need Jesus to bring the understanding that only he can give.

he's growing the kingdom. We don't know how and we don't need to. But we do know that one day the harvest will come and it will be massive.

And what we see in the final parable here in Mark is that this parable of the mustard seed where Jesus asks, what shall we say then the kingdom is like? He compares it to a mustard seed, the smallest of all the seeds on earth.

[22 : 00] And yet when planted it grows and becomes the largest of all the garden plants, with branches big enough for birds to perch in its shade. The kingdom of God, once small, is destined to grow into something mighty.

The funny thing is at the time that Jesus spoke these words, there was no established church to speak of. He only had a small group of followers. This little band of followers, and as we know looking back because we can read it, that it would shrink even further and that the crowds that once listened to him, they would fall away.

Even the disciples would cower in fear and deny Jesus even to a little girl. And all of the kingdom, all of God's kingdom at the moment of the cross is literally just one man, one man called Jesus, hung on the cross.

And at that moment, wouldn't it be tempting to think, is this it? Is this the kingdom? Is this the kingdom that you promised Jesus? Is this what it's going to be?

Maybe you felt that way. You know, if you look around this city that we live in, if you listen to the news that you see every day, does it look like you that the kingdom is gloriously expanding?

[23 : 23] Here in northwest London, where there is the lowest proportion of gospel preaching churches in all of London, it's easy to look around the room and say, well, it's just us.

This little group of people, is this it? See, from that tiny mustard seed, the plant will grow until it becomes the largest of all the plants.

And the growth, it might be imperceptible. For years and years, you can't tell anything is happening, but it is. And we can take hope in the knowledge that the kingdom will ultimately prevail.

Jesus says, let me tell you something. From what seems like the lowest of all moments, from the absolute devastation of hope at my own death, he says, in three days I will rebuild this temple.

The brilliant glory of the resurrection will come, and out of this small band of followers, is going to come a kingdom. A kingdom that will spread from the east to the west, from the north to the south, and it will transform the world as we know it.

[24 : 34] And beyond. Because one day, every knee will bow. And one day, every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord. And it will be a worldwide, eternity-wide kingdom.

kingdom. And Jesus says, listen, my kingdom will come. My will will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Amen? I want to be part of that kingdom. And the beauty of the gospel of Jesus Christ is that we can. Because of Jesus, because this Jesus came into the world as the lamp to bring light and understanding, namely the understanding that we could not enter that kingdom on our own.

That there's no way. And that we would need a savior. And in a completely unexpected, unplanned, something we could not fathom, in this crazy turn of events, the king of this kingdom gives himself as the sacrifice, as the payment, as the ticket to open the gates to the city.

And to let you and let me in. And all it takes is a little faith. Even faith the size of a tiny mustard seed. Mark concludes by stating that Jesus spoke in many parables.

[26 : 05] And that he spoke the word to them as much as they could understand, and he didn't say anything to them without using these parables. Right? Interestingly, despite the stories and the teachings that you read, that Jesus shared, many, including the disciples, didn't fully understand at the time.

They were there with him, they heard it from his mouth, but they didn't understand. They needed Jesus to explain the parables to them. Just as we need the Spirit of God to open our minds and help us to comprehend his teachings.

And the parables sort of act like a filter for the crowds that might follow Jesus. Right? then and now. They would be, they would blind, the parables would blind the eyes of those who wouldn't believe.

And they would put deep questions in the hearts of those who would believe. But Jesus would explain it to them. And the Spirit will explain it to you. And the question is, will you ever understand? Yes, we will understand. There will be a day when we can look back and we can say, God, now I understand your plan. Now I understand what you were doing all this time.

[27 : 19] It all makes sense now. When I was going through that challenge and I couldn't see it because I was stuck in the middle, now it's all been made clear. When I couldn't make sense of that circumstance that I found myself in and I didn't understand what you were doing, I needed understanding and now you've opened my eyes.

I see how you are the lamp and that you're bringing light and you don't want your light to be hidden. I believe that you're at work even when I can't tell and when I can't see the shoot out of the soil, even if it doesn't look like it.

And that your kingdom grows without your help, without our help, without my help. I trust that your kingdom will grow and that in time your will will ultimately be done.

And that your promises will come true. And that the sad things of this earth and this life will come untrue. So like the man who looks at Jesus, he says, Lord, I do believe.

We do believe. Please help our unbelief. Shall we pray? Just quietly take a moment to pray silently where you are.

[28 : 36] Ask the Lord for understanding something that he's put on your heart in this moment. And you Thank you.

For how you have sown the seeds to implant in our hearts that we might grow to know you. Thank you for sending Jesus to be the lamp to illuminate our hearts and minds to reveal the true purposes of your kingdom.

We praise you. That even when we can't see, we can't understand how you're working, that you never sleep nor slumber. And that through it all you're working to bring the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

And God, we look forward to the kingdom of heaven. That we might spend eternity with you and that our hope would be fully realized. And we might spend our days bringing you glory and enjoying you forever.

Thank you, Lord Jesus, we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.