

Mark 4:26-34 (cf. Mt 13:31-35; Lk 13:18-19)

²⁶ Jesus also said, "The Kingdom of God is like a farmer who scatters seed on the ground. ²⁷ Night and day, while he's asleep or awake, the seed sprouts and grows, but he does not understand how it happens. ²⁸ The earth produces the crops on its own. First a leaf blade pushes through, then the heads of wheat are formed, and finally the grain ripens. ²⁹ And as soon as the grain is ready, the farmer comes and harvests it with a sickle, for the harvest time has come." ³⁰ Jesus said, "How can I describe the Kingdom of God? What story should I use to illustrate it? ³¹ It is like a mustard seed planted in the ground. It is the smallest of all seeds, ³² but it becomes the largest of all garden plants; it grows long branches, and birds can make nests in its shade." ³³ Jesus used many similar stories and illustrations to teach the people as much as they could understand. ³⁴ In fact, in his public ministry he never taught without using parables; but afterward, when he was alone with his disciples, he explained everything to them. (NLT)

²⁶ Jesús continuó: «El reino de Dios se parece a quien esparce semilla en la tierra. ²⁷ Sin que éste sepa cómo, y ya sea que duerma o esté despierto, día y noche brota y crece la semilla. ²⁸ La tierra da fruto por sí sola; primero el tallo, luego la espiga, y después el grano lleno en la espiga. ²⁹ Tan pronto como el grano está maduro, se le mete la hoz, pues ha llegado el tiempo de la cosecha.» ³⁰ También dijo: «¿Con qué vamos a comparar el reino de Dios? ¿Qué parábola podemos usar para describirlo? ³¹ Es como un grano de mostaza: cuando se siembra en la tierra, es la semilla más pequeña que hay, ³² pero una vez sembrada crece hasta convertirse en la más grande de las hortalizas, y echa ramas tan grandes que las aves pueden anidar bajo su sombra.» ³³ Y con muchas parábolas semejantes les enseñaba Jesús la palabra hasta donde podían entender. ³⁴ No les decía nada sin emplear parábolas. Pero cuando estaba a solas con sus discípulos, les explicaba todo. (NVI)

²⁶ Καὶ ἔλεγεν· οὕτως ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ ὡς ἄνθρωπος βάλῃ τὸν σπόρον ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ²⁷ καὶ καθεύδῃ καὶ ἐγείρηται νύκτα καὶ ἡμέραν καὶ ὁ σπόρος βλαστᾷ καὶ μηκύνεται ὡς οὐκ οἶδεν αὐτός ²⁸ αὐτομάτῃ ἡ γῆ καρποφορεῖ πρῶτον χόρτον εἶτα στάχυν εἶτα πλήρῃς σίτον ἐν τῷ στάχυνι ²⁹ ὅταν δὲ παραδοῖ ὁ καρπὸς εὐθὺς ἀποστέλλει τὸ δρέπανον ὅτι παρέστηκεν ὁ θερισμὸς ³⁰ Καὶ ἔλεγεν· πῶς ὁμοιώσωμεν τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ ἢ ἐν τίνι αὐτὴν παραβολῇ θῶμεν ³¹ ὡς κόκκῳ σινάπεως ὃς ὅταν σπαρῇ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς μικρότερον ὄν πάντων τῶν σπερμάτων τῶν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ³² καὶ ὅταν σπαρῇ ἀναβαίνει καὶ γίνεται μεῖζον πάντων τῶν λαχάνων καὶ ποιεῖ κλάδους μεγάλους ὥστε δύνασθαι ὑπὸ τὴν σκιάν αὐτοῦ τὰ πετεινὰ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ κατασκηνοῦν ³³ Καὶ τοιαύταις παραβολαῖς πολλαῖς ἐλάλει αὐτοῖς τὸν λόγον καθὼς ἠδύνατο ἀκούειν. ³⁴ χωρὶς δὲ παραβολῆς οὐκ ἐλάλει αὐτοῖς κατ' ἰδίαν δὲ τοῖς ἰδίοις μαθηταῖς ἐπέλυεν πάντα (NA28)

Notes:

A. **Setting** {Markan Sandwich}:

- a. Recall: Jesus is teaching the crowds from a boat in 4:1-9 & 21-33 {the bun}. ← We are currently in the bottom bun.
- b. Jesus is teaching the *insiders*: the *twelve* and those with Him (4:10) in a private location in 4:10-20 {the filling}.

B. **Review: A reminder of a few brief aspects regarding the interpreting of parables**, recall:

- a. Parable (παραβολή, *parabolē*)—for Mark, a parable is a broad literary form that compares different things; parables include numerous (more specific) subclassifications, e.g., similes, metaphors, allegories, aphorisms, proverbs, etc.
 - i. Interpreting parables—two erroneous extremes:
 1. Unlimited allegorizing, i.e., every detail can take on (sometimes unlimited) significance.
 - a. Allegorizing is generally not valid, unless explicit within the text, e.g., 4:13-20 where Jesus assigns significance to the various characters & details. But even here, we are not free to allegorize much farther than where the text does.
 2. Strictly limited to one point per parable.
 - a. While safer than extreme allegorizing, not all of Jesus' parables are limited to a single point, e.g., the above example (4:13-20).
 3. Generally, located somewhere between the two extremes, parables have a central focal idea and possibly a/some significant emphases.
 - ii. Because Jesus was an itinerant teacher, He told many (if not all) of His parables on multiple occasions and in multiple contexts—therefore, a parable's interpretation must take into account occasional aspects and nuances—which are best determined by their immediate context within each Gospel.
- b. Context (Jesus' teaching):
 - i. **in Mark**: 1:14-15 is a compact summary of Jesus' preaching/teaching: "God's Good News". The *Good News* is:
 1. "Jesus [is] the Messiah, the Son of God" (1:1), &
 2. "The time promised by God has come at last... The Kingdom of God is near!" (1:15)Jesus' preaching/teaching is centered on His identity, the Kingdom of God, and their interrelationship (cf. 2:19-22).
 - ii. **in 4:1-20**: He taught with *many* parables (4:2, 33), of which Mark has selected some¹ (4:33).
 1. There exists some *inter*-relationship between the parables within 4:1-33.
 2. There exists some *intra*-autonomy within each particular parable within 4:1-33.
 - iii. **in 4:26-31**: "The Kingdom of God is like"...

¹ Not at random or arbitrarily, but to effectively communicate coherent aspects of the Kingdom of God, e.g., its nature, certainty, and reception.

1. “Both parables² are stories of surprise. One could never imagine the conclusion from the beginning. Such is the kingdom of God.” (Edwards 2002).
2. Also, both stories radically differ from all possible expectations Jesus’ hearers could have had regarding the Kingdom of God (cf. 2:21-22).
 - a. Seeds...?...really...the kingdom of God is likened to seeds, and not likened to something more glorious, grand, immediate, etc.³

C. Parable of the Growing Seed (4:26-29)⁴:

- a. What is the parable about, i.e., what is the Kingdom of God like?
 - i. The parable has three subjects: farmer/sower, seed, ground/earth/soil & various actions and interactions:
 1. Farmer⁵:
 - a. Scatters seed (v. 26),
 - b. Sleeps & awakens⁶ (v. 27),
 - c. Does not understand how it [the seed] sprouts & grows (v. 27),
 - d. Harvests (v. 29).
 2. Seed & Ground together:
 - a. Sprouts and grows (v. 27),
 - b. Produces the crops on its own (independent of the farmer)⁷:
 - i. Inherent with generative power and an orderly and inevitable process: “First a leaf blade... then the heads... finally the grain ripens” (v. 28).
 - ii. It is perhaps tempting to allegorize much of the details, but the central focal idea is on *the process of growth*. **The Kingdom of God is likened to an orderly process of inevitable growth.**
- b. Orderly Process of Inevitable Growth: significant emphases and/or corollaries
 - i. Time is involved—there is a distinct beginning (and has arrived), i.e., scattering of the seed (cf. 1:15; 2:19; 4:3); an inevitable distinct completion⁸, i.e., harvest⁹ (cf. 4:20-21); & a substantial interval of time between the two, i.e., days where the farmer sleeps and rises while simultaneously and independently the seed grows (cf. 4:22).
 - ii. The Kingdom of God has come, but it is growing and this is a process. It will not come in full instantaneously; rather, from the farmer’s [humanity’s] perspective the process is lengthy and ‘normal’.
 - iii. During this time:
 1. The process of growth is not from a sensory perception ‘flashy’, i.e., attractive or spectacular. Rather it appears ordinary and somewhat imperceptible (and perhaps is experienced as painfully slow and mundane). The farmer’s life is business as usual, i.e., working hard as a farmer, day and night, day after day.
 2. Process of growth is independent of the farmer¹⁰.
 - a. The farmer cannot:
 - i. Generate the growth,
 - ii. Bring about the harvest,
 - iii. Speed up the process,
 - iv. Understand how it happens. The farmer simply observes, works, and trusts in the process of growth (Despite lack of understanding, the farmer is confident in the eventuality of the harvest).
 - b. The seed contains within itself generative ability, and *automatically* grows—sets in motion the orderly process that faithfully results in harvest.
 3. The process of growth is orderly and consistent, culminating in the ripened grain—the arrival of harvest time.
 - iv. The Kingdom of God’s process of growth is consummated with the arrival of the *harvest*¹¹ time.
- c. The Kingdom of God is like... The Kingdom of God is present, but it is a timely and orderly process generated (set in motion) by Jesus. Its growth is independent of humanity’s efforts—we cannot bring about the kingdom by force,

² Vv. 26-29 & 30-32.

³ “The God whom Jesus introduces will not be kept at celestial arm’s length. Jesus does not tell us how high and lofty God is but how very near and present he is, and how the routines of planting and harvesting are mundane clues to the nature and plan of God.” (Edwards 2002).

⁴ This parable is unique to Mark, i.e., it is not found elsewhere in the Gospels.

⁵ Cf. 4:14, where the farmer is anyone who takes God’s word to others, including Jesus, but not strictly limited to Jesus. “The lack of the farmer’s understanding indicates that the farmer is not to be interpreted as an allegorical reference to Jesus... Mark 13:32 does not refute this, because, whereas Jesus could be ignorant of the time of the kingdom’s consummation, he was certainly not ignorant concerning the already now-not yet dimension of the kingdom of God...” (Stein 2008).

⁶ Over a period of nights and days, i.e., ‘day after day’. The Jewish day began at sundown.

⁷ ‘all by itself’ (αὐτομάτη, *automatē*); I bet you can guess what English word is derived from *automatē*—*automatic*.

⁸ Not of the Kingdom of God, but of the process of growth.

⁹ Recall: *Harvest*, in general, is a frequent, rich, and diverse image in the Bible—relevant to this parable: “[the image of a/the harvest symbolizes] the consummation of a process that must be worked out over time, like the full program of God’s kingdom.” (Ryken, Wilhoit and Longman III 1998). We don’t want to get too far ahead of ourselves, but cf. Joel 3:13 (of which v. 29 has a clear allusion toward) & Rev 14:15.

¹⁰ “This does not mean that the sower [farmer] abandons his work, nor that he is uninterested in what takes place” (Lane 1974).

¹¹ “There can be no doubt that the harvest in view is the coming judgment of the world, for the concluding words of verse 29 reflect the Hebrew text of Joel 3:13” (Lane 1974). We will look at this later as we work through Mark, but it is useful to note it now.

persuasion, or any other efforts¹². Humanity cannot understand how it happens (grows) at a fundamental level. The Kingdom of God did not arrive, nor is it growing, accompanied by fanfare, military legions, or moving speeches¹³. The process of growth will unfailingly bring about harvest (this includes salvation and judgement).

- D. **Parable of the Mustard Seed (4:30-34):** *How can I describe the Kingdom of God? What story should I use to illustrate it?* (v. 30)¹⁴
- a. Similarities with the previous parable:
 - i. “A seed is planted in the ground” (v. 31),
 - ii. A process of growth is involved: “it becomes...it grows” (v. 32).
 - b. Differences with the previous parable:
 - i. The seed is identified specifically as: *a mustard seed*¹⁵,
 1. The smallness¹⁶ of the seed is highlighted (v. 31),
 2. The vast physical end-state of the plant’s growth is highlighted (rather than the interim process) (v. 32).
 3. *Aside*: the mustard plant/bush (even domesticated) wasn’t always a desirable plant: “[Mustard] was an extremely noxious and dangerous plant, as it threatened to take over whatever area its seed finally took root in.” (Witherington III 2001) (cf. Pliny the Elder: *Natural History*). It is reaching, but within this imagery, one could think of numerous possible allusions. For instance, could it remind someone of those ‘unwanted’ folks, e.g., tax collectors, sinners, and gentiles, that Jesus insisted on inviting into the kingdom, could they possibly be seen as unwanted invaders of Israel’s kingdom vision?? I don’t know. The text doesn’t bear the burden of claiming that Mark and/or Jesus intended the meaning.
 - c. Central focal idea—the contrast between small beginnings and proportionately large, tenacious, and surprising results¹⁷. **The Kingdom of God is likened to beginnings of which appear tiny, obscure, insignificant, etc., but result in inescapably large and encompassing results.** Large enough, that birds can make nests in its shade (cf. Ps 104:12, 17; Ezek 17:23; 31:6; Dan 4:9-21)¹⁸.
 - d. Contrast between small beginnings and large results: significant emphases and/or corollaries
 - i. Compared to the vast results, the apparently ‘small, obscure, and insignificant’ beginnings are more relatable and applicable aspects of the Kingdom to Jesus’ hearers¹⁹.
 1. The Kingdom has tangible and singular beginnings (the mustard seed) in Jesus’ arrival on the scene²⁰ (cf. 1:15; 2:19).
 - a. This appears, from mankind’s perspective, to be of very small and obscure beginnings: The Kingdom of God has its beginning in Jesus²¹ of Nazareth.
Jesus of Nazareth:
 - i. (for at least some, possibly many) the alleged bastard son (cf. Mt 1:18-25),
 - ii. of a carpenter²² (cf. Mt 1:18-25),
 - iii. from Nazareth²³,

¹² In Jesus’ day, the Kingdom of God was anticipated, expected, and longed for. Various understandings of what the kingdom would entail existed, accompanied with corresponding ideologies that included various strategies to ‘bring about’ the kingdom, e.g., the Zealots: bring about the kingdom by forced resistance and revolution; the Pharisees: coax the kingdom by rigid [religious] legal observance; the Essenes: by redefining the true Israel as themselves—acting as a true priesthood and acceptable sacrifice (the Qumran community defined their mission with the same passage of scripture as did John the Baptist: Isa 40:3 (cf. 1:2-4)).

¹³ True discipleship is a main theme in Mark; this will highlight and clarify what ‘a day in the life’ consists of within the Kingdom, during this growth process stage.

¹⁴ “The twofold introduction is paralleled in Isa 40:18” (Lane 1974). “[Isa 40:18] is not just an accidental echo. The passage is all about a fresh vision of God, the creator, coming to rescue his people, coming to restore Israel after her time of devastation. (Wright 2004).

¹⁵ “The mustard seed is proverbially called the smallest seed.” (Bock 2005).

¹⁶ The mustard seed was/is not the smallest seed. Surprisingly (at least to me), this has proven to be a hang-up for some and seen as problematic for Jesus as God, i.e., a failure on His part—Was Jesus ignorant to this fact? Was he mistaken? If so, what does that imply about Him? Or...was Jesus simply not giving a botany lesson, and rather using a natural comparison (which was likely visible to his audience as he was speaking; the mustard plant (wild and cultivated) was certainly prevalent in His locale, i.e., it served as a visual aid) to describe his subject matter: The Kingdom of God (not *Botany 101*). “Holding Jesus responsible for something he had no intention of teaching or implying shows the inability of the accuser to understand language, not a failure of Jesus or the Gospel writers.” (Kaiser Jr., et al. 1996). Also, for Mark, the context involves *seeds planted*, of which the mustard seed is the smallest seed commonly planted by Palestinian Jews. “Surely one would not expect Jesus to say, “[the mustard seed] which...ranks in the upper one-tenth of one percent of smallness in seed sizes.” (Stein 2008).

¹⁷ If one is unfamiliar with the mustard plant, one would be surprised by the huge plant produced by such a tiny seed. Also, one could be (I was) surprised to learn about the tenacity of the mustard plant, and its ability to spread and remain—despite efforts of removal.

¹⁸ In the OT, τὰ πετεινὰ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ (*the birds of heaven*) sometimes act as imagery for the inclusion of Gentiles within God’s people (cf. above references). This may be an allusion to that. The location within Mark works well with this notion, as Jesus is about to cross the lake into Gentile Territory, i.e., the Decapolis (cf. 5:1-20 esp. vv. 15, 18-20), and Mark’s initial Roman [Gentile] readers would certainly have appreciated the allusion. However, the literature is fairly evenly divided on whether this allusion was intentional—with balanced arguments both ways—so, I wouldn’t be overly dogmatic about seeing or ignoring this possible allusion, but I felt it to be at least worth noting.

¹⁹ “Had Jesus desired to emphasize the power and glory of the kingdom of God he could have told a parable about a cedar, which was a symbol of might and splendor. But the mystery of the kingdom is not present in the cedar; it is present in a tiny mustard seed.” (Edwards 2002). The image of a cedar, specifically of Lebanon, could also have contributed to a misunderstanding of nationalistic triumph.

²⁰ God incarnate—God as man—within mankind’s existence: subject to the arrow of time and 3-dimensional space and within mankind’s historical, geographical, cultural, and political setting.

²¹ Recall: Mark, his readers, and all believing readers/hearers since, understand Jesus as “the Messiah, the Son of God”, i.e., God. However, to those in Mark’s narrative, at this point can’t understand Jesus in His fullness—which is why Jesus is stressing the importance for them to ‘be with Him’ as He is revealed, and will in return reveal (cf. 4:21-25).

²² Not the most glorious occupation.

²³ a regular town, and not the major city of Galilee (cf. Jn 1:46).

- iv. of Galilee²⁴,
- v. in Palestine/The Levant²⁵,
- vi. in the Roman Empire.
- vii. In short, from humanity's perspective, Jesus was seen as a common man, with a questionable beginning, from a troublesome dot on an oppressive Roman map—small and insignificant beginnings to say the least.

2. Perhaps it is not wise to discount things *a priori* with apparently small beginnings (cf. Jn 6:8, 12-13).

E. The Kingdom of God is like...

- a. What appears to have tiny, obscure, and insignificant beginnings initiates a long 'a day in the life of the common man' process of growth—that is independent of human action and initiative, and completely lacking the 'pizazz' of human dreams, ideas, and expectations—this process will, although not flamboyantly, but faithfully and inevitably, culminate in a successful harvest and an overwhelmingly grand, shelter-giving plant, i.e., the Kingdom of God.
- b. In short, this is not at all what was expected, but it turns out to be so much more than could have ever been expected...or dreamt of.

F. Conclusion to this block of Jesus' teaching (vv. 33-34):

- a. The set of parables Mark has included is not an exhaustive account or transcription of Jesus' teaching during this particular occasion, rather a sampling (v. 33) that summarizes the reaction to the Gospel thus far in the narrative—and the division that accompanies it, defined solely by one's proximity and relationship to Jesus, i.e., *insiders* and *outsiders*—and anticipates reactions and events to come. This teaching section also (like gravity) serves to draw *outsiders in* and draw *insiders closer in* and remain *insiders*—the boundary is permeable at this point, i.e., some *insiders* will become *outsiders*, and some *outsiders* will become *insiders*.
- b. "[Jesus used many parables] to teach the people as much as they could understand" (v.33).
 - i. Recall: parables simultaneously reveal and conceal, depending on one's ability to *hear*²⁶, i.e., one's willingness to be actively and deliberately with Him. Parables stimulated the hearers into hopefully deep-thinking, which in turn would lead them to seek further explanation from Jesus. Cf. 1 Cor 3:1-2.
 - ii. So, let's *have ears to hear*—this will lead us to be with Jesus so we are present for His explanation of everything (v. 34).
- c. Recall: each of the parables (4:1-30) are like individual notes (inherent with distinct meaning and benefit) that form a collective chord—we want to take time to hear the chord—a brief synopsis (cf. previous notes):
 - i. The relationship between *hearing* → *understanding*, i.e., being with Jesus (*insiders*) and the Kingdom of God.
 - ii. The importance of *hearing*.
 - iii. Why mixed reactions (mostly negative) to Jesus have been experienced thus far in the narrative, and will continue to be experienced.
 - iv. Jesus will be revealed and consequently reveal all.
 - v. The nature of the Kingdom of God, and the initiator of it [Jesus], is radically different from all expectations.
 - vi. In short: Even if it too often appears to the contrary, looks radically different from expectations, and feels all too mundane, "The time promised by God has come at last! The Kingdom of God is near! Repent of your sins and believe the Good News!" (1:15). This is the occasion solely because "Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God (1:1). One's proximity and relationship to the Kingdom of God is dependent upon one's proximity and relationship to Jesus. To reiterate once again: both Jesus & Mark cannot stress enough the importance to *have ears to hear*!

²⁴ not the major region of Palestine. *For our purposes (at the moment), we won't worry too much about exact political-status titles for regions and their relationships.

²⁵ a conquered, occupied, and often turbulent minor Roman province/outpost/colony. *For our purposes (at the moment), we won't worry too much about exact political-status titles for regions and their relationships.

²⁶ "Right hearing is attentive, committed, determined, obedient hearing which bears fruit" (Witherington III 2001).