

**And he said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”**

**With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it. He did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything.**

**(Mark 4:30–34)**

## Introduction

Some twenty years ago, a church member showed up at my house with some trees. To be honest, they looked more like bare sticks, but he assured me they would grow!

One of those was a small oak tree, less than a meter tall. This church member had found it growing in his yard, dug it up, put it in a pot, and brought it to me. From a fallen acorn, germination took place under the ground, and a little upstart of a tree was formed. That little tree is now fifteen-plus metres tall and it regularly clogs my pool with leaves! I thought about the history of the tree the other day when I read the saying, “Great oaks from little acorns grow.”

God has designed nature in such a way that little seeds can become great trees. We just need to be patient. That is what Jesus told his disciples in this final parable – the parable of the mustard tree. They were to plant, be patient, and, one day, they will marvel at the progress. Why? Because the kingdom of God is a plant in the soil of the promise of progress.

God’s work usually progresses inauspiciously, invisibly, imperceptibly and yet inevitably. It is, precisely because it is God’s work that it will come to pass. God expects us to believe this. He expects us to please him by having faith in him. But true faith implies obedience.

When it comes to the kingdom of God, we are to sow the seed and leave the results with God. In this sense, church planting is easy (as one church planter recently said at a conference I attended).

## Context

Though crowds were interested in Jesus, nevertheless, as Mark has made clear, not all were in favour of Jesus. Not only the religious establishment, but even his own family were at this point outsiders when it came to understanding and submitting to Jesus' announcement of the good news of the kingdom.

It is in this context of doubt, uncertainty and opposition in which Jesus tells these parables. It was just what the disciples needed to hear – and what we need to hear as well.

In the parable of the mustard seed, Jesus assured those with ears to hear of the progress of the kingdom of God. What had begun with the Lord Jesus Christ would continue to grow and to expand to such a degree that all the nations would eventually find shelter in it. Jesus desired to encourage his disciples to persevere in the face of seeming ineffectiveness.

This parable offers great encouragement concerning promised progress. May we be encouraged to prayerfully seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. The results will be disproportionately astounding!

As we study this last parable in chapter four, we will do so under four major headings.

## The Meaning is Progress

In this parable, Jesus (again) likens the kingdom of God to the planting of a seed. However, here the seed is not a seed of grain or of corn but a mustard seed, which, in those days and in that part of the world, was considered the smallest of seeds.

Although it is such a small seed, said Jesus, it results in a disproportionate result – a mustard tree, a shrub that might grow to about three to four metres high in a single season.

The preceding parable emphasised the process of growth whereas this story highlights the contrast between beginning (“smallest”) and end (“larger than all”). It is, says Lane, a “contrast between the smallest of the seeds and the tallest of the shrubs.”

Jesus was emphasising great growth in the light of such smallness; a very auspicious result from such an inauspicious beginning. This, Jesus said, is like the kingdom of God. As Wessel comments, this parable “contrasts a tiny beginning with enormous results. We must not judge the significance of results by the size of its beginning.”

## Size Doesn't Matter

When it comes to God's sovereignty, size is irrelevant. Since God is the creator of all, and since God has designed seeds to reproduce according to their DNA, we should not be surprised by such growth, for everything that the mustard shrub requires is in the seed. It has great potential precisely because God created it to be so. So with the kingdom of God. The emphasis here is that the eventual product whose growth outstrips all similar plants. The kingdom of God will grow far beyond any earthly empire. The old hymn got it right: "Little is much when God is in it."

## Shade for All

Jesus says that the resultant shrub "becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade." What are we to learn from this?

The obvious implication is that the result of the germination and growth is that others are benefited – in this case, the birds. Was Jesus merely being sentimental or poetic? Or was he saying something far more profound? I think the latter.

We have scriptural warrant to suggest that Jesus was prophesying worldwide blessing from the kingdom of God.

There are interpreters who think that the birds represent something negative. The Scofield Bible suggest that the birds represent that which is foul, which will infiltrate and mix with God's people in the kingdom. This, at least, is consistent with their extreme form of dispensationalism, which believes that Jesus will reign and rule on earth over those who are glorified as well as those who are unregenerate during an earthly millennial rule. This interpretation leans heavily on Revelation 18:2: "And he cried mightily with a loud voice, saying, 'Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and has become a dwelling place of demons, a prison for every foul spirit, and a cage for every unclean and hated bird!'" Such an interpretation, if I can be so bold, is an illegitimate stretch. Be careful of your eschatology.

A better interpretation arises from passages such as the Psalm 104:10–12: "You make springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills; they give drink to every beast of the field; the wild donkeys quench their thirst. Beside them the birds of the heavens dwell; they sing among the branches."

Clearly, the birds and the branches are mentioned in a positive context – that of God's kind, caring and gracious providence. This principle can be found in similar texts.

In Daniel 4, Daniel was called to interpret Nebuchadnezzar's dream. In the dream, Nebuchadnezzar saw of a large tree, in whose branches the birds of the air came to nest

and in whose shade animals found rest. Daniel interpreted this positively: The tree represented Babylon, under Nebuchadnezzar, who provided rest and shade for the surrounding nations. Ultimately, because of Nebuchadnezzar's pride, the tree would be cut down, scattering those who found refuge in and under it (see Daniel 4:9–21).

Or consider these verses from Ezekiel's prophecy:

- Ezekiel 17:22–23—Thus says the Lord GOD: "I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and will set it out. I will break off from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one, and I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar. And under it will dwell every kind of bird; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest. And all the trees of the field shall know that I am the LORD; I bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish. I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it."
- Ezekiel 31:6—All the birds of the heavens made their nests in its boughs; under its branches all the beasts of the field gave birth to their young, and under its shadow lived all great nations.

God was referring to Assyria in her imperial glory. When this was her situation, other nations benefitted from the kingdom of Assyria. Jesus' point, to the contrary, is that as the kingdom of God grows, so many nations will be blessed through this. But how?

Nations will be blessed as they believe the gospel. They will be blessed by the ethical fruit that rises from the gospel. They are blessed by God's. I'm on grace.

It seems that Jesus was saying that the kingdom of God provides blessings for many. Its benefits go beyond the one who sows it.

The parable emphasises the size and importance of the tree—of the kingdom of God. It may, in fact, be a reference to the reality that even those who are not subjects of the kingdom nevertheless benefit from the kingdom of God. That is, the world is a better place because of the gospel of God and what it produces.

Jesus was clearly thinking growth of a massive Empire. The kingdom of God will take the place of the Old Testament empires. God's grace will extend to all peoples.

### Why Not a Cedar?

Some have questioned why Jesus used the illustration of a shrub rather than a majestic cedar. I would suggest a few potential reasons.

First, these parables seem to focus on a small plot of ground, like a private garden. Hence the mustard shrub would be most fitting in such a setting. It seems that these parables are in the context of an annual yield and so, again, the mustard shrub is more fitting than something akin to a cedar tree.

Second, the nature of the kingdom of God is such that a humbler plant is better suited as a type. Everything about Jesus' ministry thus far had been characterised by simplicity and humility, if not secrecy. The mustard seed and shrub suit this atmosphere much better.

Third, the mustard shrub was often considered to be a weed, and therefore a nuisance. Because these shrubs could sprout up very quickly, they were almost ubiquitous and that made them obnoxious to many.

Think about it: The kingdom of God is good news to those who are disciples of Jesus. We thrill at its advancement, much like the early disciples and many among the crowds. But not everyone was happy about the presence of the King. For many, like a weed to a farmer, Jesus was a nuisance. The sooner he could be uprooted and removed, the better. Many of the scribes and Pharisees would certainly be among this group (see 3:6, 22–30).

Perhaps this was a reason that Jesus used the example of the mustard seed and shrub. I don't know. But we do know that, for many, the kingdom of God is a nuisance—and worse. For many, the sooner it can be uprooted, the better.

Throughout history, this is precisely what many have done. But like the mustard shrub, when it is attacked and uprooted, invariably hundreds of seeds are scattered by the shaking, and more shrubs appear. Jesus said that he would build his church and the gates of Hades would not prevail against it. Praise God for this!

We should be prepared that not everyone will be thrilled by the presence of the kingdom of God. After all, those who refuse to bow the knee to Jesus are loyal to opposing kings. And they don't appreciate the rival—the one who is the true King.

When God's church is attacked, it seems to do even better! As an early church father famously said, the blood of martyrs is the seed of the church. When their blood soaks into the soil, an amazing harvest may not be far behind. This has been true throughout history.

The disciples faced great opposition in Acts 4–5 and the Lord added greatly to the number of discipleship. Saul viciously opposed the church (Acts 8:1–4) but then God used the very same man to reach the world with the gospel (Acts 11:19–30; etc.). Paul and Silas faced tremendous opposition at Philippi, and yet some of those very opponents were brought to faith and a healthy church was planted in that city.

The church in China exploded after the Boxer Rebellion and its expulsion of Christians. This has proven true in many other Eastern European countries where the gospel has been suppressed. Jim Elliot and his fellow missionaries were martyred in Ecuador, but God used that as a catalyst to bring gospel progress there.

The point of this parable has been illustrated in space-time history many times over.

## The Measure of Progress

It is not always easy to measure the growth of God's kingdom, but neither is it impossible. Jesus clearly taught that the results of the kingdom would be visible. We need to ask and answer at least two questions concerning this.

First, what are looking for? That is, what is the evidence of the growth of the kingdom of God? Second, can we measure its growth?

To the first question, the primary growth of the kingdom is the salvation of souls marked by the conversion of souls. Changed lives. Transformed lives is a legitimate measurement of the growth of the kingdom of God. This is a legitimate measurement because this is the God-glorifying goal of his kingdom.

The New Testament records this kind of progress:

- Acts 2:41 – So those who received his word were baptised, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.
- Acts 6:1, 7 – Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.... And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.
- Acts 12:24 – But the word of God increased and multiplied.
- Acts 13:49 – And the word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region.
- Acts 19:20 – So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.

These verses encourage us about God's promise of the progress of his kingdom. In fact, this promise was more than merely inaugurated before the end of the first century, for John records, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever" (Revelation 11:15). And our response to this should be like that of the 24 elders who sit on their thrones before God, we should fall on our faces, and worship God (v. 16).

All of this was, and will be, the fulfilment of God's promise as recorded in Isaiah 9:6–7:

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

But other things will also be transformed. When Jesus saves us from our sins, a whole lot of other things are changed—including homes, marriages, parent-child relationships, and ethics.

With the recently-released crime statistics in our country, it is clear that South Africa needs much more advancement when it comes to the kingdom of God. As the gospel delivers people from the penalty and power of sin, this will have effect of salt on a putrefying culture and will shine more light into a darkened society.

I recently ministered at a Biblical Counselling Conference in another part of our country with the son and grandson of one of the early pioneers in the nouthetic counselling movement. I was blessed to see a multigenerational continuation of a burden that a Christian doctor had. The work continues to grow.

To the second question—can we measure progress?—I answer, yes, we can. When you look at world history, yes, things are a lot better than they were. The mustard shrub has made wonderful and measurable progress.

When you look at the growth of the church throughout history, yes, there has been remarkable and measurable growth. The mustard seed continues to grow.

## The Miracle of Progress

At BBC, we have been witness to the miracle of progress. Our church was started more than forty years ago in a home on a street with few houses in a suburb that was only beginning to grow. Sunday School children led to conversion of parents and others. God sent a pastor-preacher. A piece of ground purchased and a small building erected. Gospel tracts were sown in the community. Conversions occurred, discipleship took place, and missions was early a priority. The rest, as they say, is history.

Some 16 years ago, BBC sowed a missionary family 16 in the of an Asian country, and today there are at least five churches, which stemmed from those efforts, faithfully preaching, evangelising and discipling.

Our church is a member of an association of Southern African churches that began, some fourteen years ago, with nine member churches. At the recent AGM, we welcomed into membership our 54th member church. Meaningful partnerships have developed amongst those churches. We are grateful for what God has done.

I recently sat and listened to Conrad Mbewe and Phil Hunt talk about the growth of Reformed Baptist churches in Zambia. Thirty-five years ago, there were but a handful of faithful churches there, but God has graciously produced incredible growth in that nation.

I could go on and on, but I think we get the point: God is at work even when what he must work with is small and seemingly inconsequential – like the mustard seed.

The kingdom of God has enormous potential, even if it is not immediate. God doesn't work according to our timeline. His kingdom may have started small, but it has disproportionate potential. It provides blessings for many. The spread of the gospel will be evidenced; it will become visible.

We need to patiently wait for the growth/advancement of the kingdom of God. If we want to be encouraged about this truth, then we need to know history. If we want to be encouraged about this truth, then we need to merely look around. The blessings of the kingdom, at least temporally, benefit the wider society. In this way, we show and share the love of God.

So, believer—church—keep sowing mustard-sized faith and trust God for the results. Believe God for the future (see Amos 9:13–15).

### The Motive for Progress

When we speak about the kingdom of God, what is predominate? What should be predominate is a kingdom filled with people who love God—a people who are “God-centred in their thoughts, God-fearing in their hearts, God-honouring in their loves” (Wells).

What David Wells calls the “holy love of God” marks those who seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. This is the end of history and the beginning of unending life in a glorious world one day: a world filled with the love of God and with those who love this God.

This is what Jesus brought into the world. This is the seed that he sowed with his life and teaching and ministry. This is what the church today aims at.

David Wells writes,

If our strongest motive, our deepest desire, is to know God, it will generate the discipline that we need to pursue this, because we will want to know God more than anything else. If this is not our strongest motive, we will find ourselves with multiple, alternative, and competing foci. These will inevitably distract us. If we are not self-directed, we will lose our ability to reflect on the deeper issues of life. Without this ability to stop, to focus, to linger, to reflect, to analyse, and to evaluate, we begin to lose touch with the God who has called us to know him.

That last sentence captures the purpose of these parables: They test our motive. That is, is God our passion, so much so that we will do the hard work of seeking to know him and his truth?

The prophet Haggai was called by God to give a massive wake up call to the nation of Israel. Having returned to Palestine—for the purpose of rebuilding and restoring Jerusalem with its central place (and purpose) for worship, the Temple—the people became complacent. Their own kingdoms, rather than God’s kingdom, took precedence (1:1–11). The result was that the temple lay in ruins (1:4).

We know from the book of Ezra that the people were discouraged about progress, and from the book of Nehemiah that opposition was strong. Yet God’s people had God’s promise that he was with them. Haggai reminds them of this. He reminds them of God’s promise of progress, of God’s promise of eventual glory (2:1–9).

This was not a promise of a glorious earthly temple as much as it was the promise of the ultimate Temple, the Lord Jesus Christ, who would be the cornerstone and the constructor of the temple of the body of Christ, the church. The New Testament is the fulfilment of these Old Testament promises.

This parable is irrelevant to the irreverent. That is, if you are not concerned about the glory of God revealed through his kingdom, this parable is meaningless to you. However, if loving God is your growing passion, then this parable will encourage you to keep on keeping on!

Every Christian should be consumed with this passion. If you are not, then you need to examine yourself. The growth of the kingdom is not merely numerical, it is also spiritual. The more we bow the knee to the King, the more the presence of the kingdom will be felt. What are you seeking? Whom are you seeking? What is your aim in life?

## The Message of Progress

In vv. 33–34, Mark informs us that Jesus spoke many parables as a preferred means of instruction. And as we have seen, the purpose of such instruction was illumination. He

desired true seekers to find what was otherwise hidden. As we have seen, the parables were spoken in such a way that the hidden would be revealed. It would be revealed to those who sought such revelation. It would seem that the disciples did. True disciples seek to know the word, and therefore the will, of God.

Jesus esteemed the truth of the kingdom of God as a treasure, and those willing to pay the price would enjoy its riches – the riches of being right with God under his loving and all wise rule.

The words “with many such parables he spoke the word to them” inform us that Jesus took seriously the proclamation of the word of God. The use of the imperfect tenses indicate that this was Jesus’ continual method of teaching, not merely a temporary mode of teaching. It is by such proclamation that the kingdom of God progresses.

Three of the four parables here emphasise the sowing (preaching) of God’s word. And the one that doesn’t reference sowing nevertheless refers to “hearing” what has been proclaimed (vv. 21–25). It is by speaking God’s word, and by properly hearing this word, that the kingdom of God progresses. We are to speak it, but what can we do about those who need to hear it?

First, we must go to where they are.

At a prayer meeting, someone mistakenly called the recent Sola 5 Conference the “World Outreach Celebration.” But really, that was no mistake, for that is precisely what the conference was about. It was about getting the gospel to a lost and dying world.

We were helpfully challenged during the conference about our need, our responsibility, and our privilege to speak the gospel to others. It is by speaking the gospel that people are usually reached with the gospel. It is by preaching the gospel that the kingdom of God progresses. We need to engage to evangelise. Are we doing so? Are we looking for opportunities to do so?

Second, once we engage, we need to helpfully explain the gospel.

Perhaps we have a clue to this in the words, “as they were able to hear it.” Jesus, as we have seen, desired those who were the real deal to be revealed by a commitment to hearing; a commitment to doing the hard work of listening and digging and enquiring and searching for the treasure trove of God’s truth. It was for this reason that Jesus spoke in parables (vv. 10–12). Yet Jesus was careful to not overtax his hearers. Therefore, he spoke in terms that they could understand. He used common, everyday themes as a vehicle to reveal spiritual truth.

It has been observed that there is a close parallel between what we find in the nature God created and spiritual truth. Perhaps this helps us to better understand what Spurgeon meant when he said there is a sermon in every flower.

God uses ordinary means in extraordinary ways. We should remember that when looking for opportunities to speak the gospel to others. Look for opportunities to make connections with what people know. This is the challenge of preaching and the use of word pictures, illustrations and applications. “Relevance” is not a bad word!

Wessel notes that Jesus spoke in parables as “his gracious means to stimulate their thinking and awaken their spiritual perception. The crowd was not ready for a direct revelation of the truth.” And so it often is. A large part of evangelism may require the initial stages of merely helping people to think. This is essential preparation for the gospel. After all, if a person is unaware of their spiritual condition, they will not be ready for revelation of the cure: the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Third, the final observation is that Jesus not only initiated and illustrated but also illuminated. We see this in the phrase “but privately to his own disciples he explained everything.”

The word “explained” literally means “to solve further.” It connotes exposition. Its only other use is in Acts 19:39 where it used in the context of settling a dispute. Here, Jesus was taking the disciples aside to settle them in their faith. If the kingdom would progress, his disciples would need more understanding. So do we.

The kingdom of God progresses as we learn and submit to the truth of our King. We need to privately meet with our Lord to learn. Our quiet times are essential. Our gathering with others to learn more in community is essential. This is true whether in small groups or one-on-one or in the congregational corporate gathering.

There are many lessons here for us, but certainly one is that we need to be faithful to hear and to learn God’s word if we will be a means of the kingdom of God progressing. And yes, this is every church member’s responsibility (Matthew 28:18–20).

So, will you? Will you work on having a godly motive (seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness)? Will you pursue God’s purpose? Will you pursue a life that conforms to his standard? Will you learn God’s word so that you can proclaim and explain God’s word? Will you commit yourself to the hard and yet richly rewarding work of being a student of God’s word?

## Conclusion

It is essential that we grasp the inability for Jesus' hearers to fully understand him until his death, burial and resurrection. Until this ultimate work, Jesus' person and work remained a secret, a mystery, hidden to all. The ultimate manifestation of Jesus would come at the cross (see John 12).

We who live on this side of the parables see far more clearly. We should, anyway. If you are not a Christian, you are in the best place to become one. You have heard the gospel explained, and now you need to bow the knee to the King of kings and the Lord of lords. Repent of your sins and trust the crucified, now risen and ascended, Saviour.

Christian, as we conclude our studies of these parables, be encouraged. Each of these parables is honest about expectations and, equally, each is hopeful about such expectations. Honestly, there will be times of unproductivity; hopefully, there is much more happening than we might expect

We can be honestly hopeful as we seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. Let us be encouraged in our efforts because little is much when God is in it. Just come by and look at my oak tree!

AMEN