

While You Were Sleeping

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[0 : 00] I can think of no more challenging time in world history to be a disciple of Jesus Christ than the one in which we are now living. On the one hand, it feels like so many things are coming apart.

On the other hand, the living God is doing something that He has never done before. Therefore, we are witnessing in our time the first ever worldwide awakening. In times past, one part of the world would experience awakening for a certain period of time, and then another part of the world would experience that waking for another period of time. But now it seems that it is happening in nearly every country of the world. 3,000 people an hour, 3,000 people an hour are coming to know Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord worldwide. 3,000 an hour. That is one new Pentecost every hour. Since we started this service, there were 3,000 more. 50,000 a day in Latin America alone. Since I brought this fact to our attention about seven weeks ago, 3,528,000 new believers have been drawn into the family. It is a new day. I just learned yesterday that a few weeks ago, meeting in the Olympic Stadium in Seoul, Korea, were 70,000

Korean students who all gave their life to full-time Christian missionary work in the world. It is a new day. Where is it all going? And how do we make sure not to miss out on it? And what is our part in it? After the vacation season this fall, I'm going to attempt to articulate what I think it all means for GPC. So you can pray for me these next weeks as I try to think and pray this through.

I'm going to try to spell out as best as I can what I see the Spirit of the Lord doing here and in our community. And I cannot imagine anyone not wanting to go where I sense He is leading us to go. I cannot conceive anyone not wanting to do it. Today, though, I want to turn our attention to a parable Jesus taught in which He helps put everything into perspective.

[2 : 39] Before we can, in fact, embrace this new thing He is doing in our day, we need to come to terms with the fundamental truth of this little parable. Our text today is Mark chapter 4, verses 26 to 27 through 29, I'm sorry.

Mark 4, 26 to 29. And if you are able, will you stand for the reading of the Word? And Jesus was saying, The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil and goes to bed at night and gets up by day and the seed sprouts up and grows.

How? He himself does not know. The soil produces crops by itself. First the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head.

But when the crop permits, He immediately puts in the sickle because the harvest has come. Spirit of the Lord, long ago you inspired Mark to write down these words for us.

And now I pray in your mercy and grace that you will take them off the page and make them come alive for us as never before. For we pray this in Jesus' name and for His glory.

[4 : 01] Amen. It is important to hear this parable in the context in which Mark placed it. Mark begins his gospel.

Mark begins his telling of the Jesus story with Jesus coming on the scene, announcing the gospel of God, announcing the good news of God. Mark 1, 14 to 15.

After John the Baptist had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God and saying, the time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near.

Jesus comes into the world with this history-shattering announcement. In me, a whole new order of existence is breaking into your brokenness.

In me, God's great future, prophesied by the prophets, is now spilling over into the present. In me, heaven is coming to earth and beginning to invade the kingdoms of the world.

[5 : 02] The kingdom of God has come near. Immediately after recording this announcement, Mark then records a series of Jesus' deeds, overcoming evil spirits, healing bodies, freeing people from guilt and shame.

Deeds which validate Jesus' great claim, and more importantly, deeds which begin to give us a picture of what the kingdom of God, of what God's new world order is going to look like when it finally comes.

Then in the fourth chapter of his gospel, Mark records a series of Jesus' parables. Parables in which Jesus opens up what he calls the mystery of the kingdom.

Now, Mark puts this little parable we just read between two other more familiar parables. Before this parable is the parable of the sower, or the parable of the four soils.

That parable tells us that although Jesus' gospel of the kingdom is initially welcomed by all, the gospel does not take in all.

[6 : 13] Some only respond on a superficial level and are left there. Some are too attached to the things of the present to freely welcome the advent of the future.

Some are not willing to make the adjustments which are necessary to receiving and entering the kingdom. Then after this little parable we read, Mark has the parable of the mustard seed, which tells us that although Jesus' new world order begins in obscurity and weakness, it eventually grows and encompasses and transforms all of reality.

What then does the parable placed between these two parables, the parable between the sower and the mustard seed, tell us? This parable tells us that the growth of God's kingdom in the world, the growth of God's new world order, is out of our control.

Say the words with me. Out of our control. Little meek. Out of our control.

Again, please. This parable teaches us that we do not and cannot have control over the kingdom.

[7 : 45] The farmer sows the seed and then goes to bed. Not because he's tired.

Not because he's lazy. But because once the seed has been sown in the soil, there is nothing more he can do. Indeed, there is nothing more he can do.

The seed begins to germinate and to grow. How, Jesus says, the farmer himself does not know.

Oh, yes. The farmer will weed the soil and water the soil.

But in the final analysis, it all happens quite apart from all the fretting and stewing of the farmer.

How? He himself does not know.

But germinate and grow it does. First the blade, then the head, then the mature grain, and then the farmer harvests the mysteriously grown crop.

[8 : 47] The parable teaches us that we receive the good news of the kingdom. And we open up to the good news of the kingdom.

And we embrace Jesus Christ as the sovereign Lord. We do everything we know how to do to respond to his word. But in the final analysis, where it all goes is out of our control.

Say the words with me again. Out of our control. Again. Out of our control. You don't believe it yet.

This parable teaches us that we disciples of Jesus Christ are given the great privilege of sowing seeds of the kingdom.

And then we are given the great privilege of being able to join in the harvest. But we do not make the kingdom grow. It grows, says verse 28, by itself.

[10 : 01] The word which Mark uses here is the word automate, which comes into the English language in the word automatically. The seeds of the kingdom grow quite apart from human efforts.

Out of our control. A humbling word. But to those of us who have nearly killed ourselves, trying to make it all happen, this is a liberating word.

We need not take upon ourselves this horrendous burden to make it all happen. And yet we do it all the time. Don't we?

We do it all the time. Our vocabulary gives us away. Listen to the verbs we use when we speak about the kingdom of God. The General Assembly of our denomination just started in Cincinnati.

It's where Lynn Johnson is right now. Listen to the language about the kingdom at the General Assembly. We speak of establishing the kingdom. We speak of building the kingdom.

[11 : 09] We speak of advancing the kingdom. Go back and read the Gospels again and you will not hear Jesus, the bringer and bearer of the kingdom, use that kind of language.

Either of us, his disciples, or of himself. These are the verbs Jesus uses of the kingdom. They are see the kingdom, receive the kingdom, enter the kingdom, inherit the kingdom, seek first the kingdom, pray for the kingdom, but never, never, never establish, build, advance.

That's because the growth of God's new world order is finally out of our hands.

Say it with me. Out of our hands. Again, out of our hands. It's out of our hands. Praise God. We're to work hard.

Don't misunderstand me. There are other parables about that. We are to work hard and we are to do our work with the highest degree of excellence imaginable.

[12 : 25] We are to teach and preach as well as we can with integrity and zeal. We are to counsel as well as we can with insight and empathy. We are to organize and strategize as carefully as we can.

We are to create music and films and plays as artistically as we can. We are to articulate the needs of the homeless and the poor as compassionately as we can.

We are to pray as fervently and faithfully as we can and then we are to let it all go. Recognizing that like the farmer, we have no control over this mystery.

We have no control over what the Holy Spirit is doing in our time. After all, we are talking about the Spirit, the Ruach Adonai, the wind of God and no one has control over the wind.

We sow the seeds of God's kingdom and go to sleep and while we are sleeping, something happens.

[13 : 33] the seeds germinate and gestate and grow slowly perhaps, but eventually they do. While we are sleeping, while we are sleeping, the farmer goes to bed, the text says.

When we begin to think that we cannot rest or play or sleep, it is time to let this little parable do its magic on us to subvert the myth that we are in control.

Eugene Peterson is becoming a household name in Christian circles right now because of his New Testament translation called The Message. But for a number of years now, he has served a number of us as a faithful mentor.

And in his book on praying the Psalms, Peterson calls us to recover the Hebrew concept of the 24-hour cycle. He reminds us that in God's scheme of things, the day does not begin at sunrise, the day begins at sundown.

Say that again. Talk about a paradigm shift. In God's scheme of things, the day does not begin with sunrise, it begins with sundown. Genesis 1, it was evening and morning day one.

[14 : 58] It was evening and morning day two and on. That is to say then that the day does not begin when we wake up. The day begins when we go to bed.

Peterson writes, the sequence is not Hebrew perversity, but grace embedded in the earth's rotation. Sleeping and waking are theological as well as biological.

Listen carefully. At sundown, we make the transition from the daylight world in which it is easy to suppose that we are in control to the night world in which we relinquish our grip on our jobs, people, and even thoughts and experience the will that is greater than our will.

Isn't that good? You go to sleep and experience the will that is greater than our will. Then Peterson writes this, we begin our lives asleep in the womb formed by another.

Passive in the darkness, we are made. When we finally venture into daylight action, we are not done with the passivities of sleep, but return to them at once. In our early years, we are more asleep than awake, while another and others nourish us into the wholeness that we have neither the wisdom nor the strength to fashion for ourselves.

[16 : 34] Gradually, our waking hours lengthen and we take up for ourselves tasks which others did for us, entering into the work of the world, loving, helping, feeding, healing, building, teaching, making. But we never arrive at a condition where we are beyond sleep, self-sufficient in 24-hour control.

Daily we give up consciousness, submitting ourselves to that which is deeper than consciousness in order to grow and be healed, be created and saved. Going to sleep is biological necessity, it is also an act of faith.

And one other line, the work of God begins while we are asleep and without our help. You know, even if our bodies were not created to need sleep, I believe God would have created us to sleep anyway because sleep breaks the illusion that we are in control.

The day begins by going to sleep and then we wake up and enter a stream that has been flowing for hours. Which means then that the question to ask in the morning and throughout the day is not how am I going to control things?

That's not the question. The question is what has God been up to while I've been sleeping and how can I get in on it? I went walking this morning as I regularly do and the birds were going bananas

today.

[18 : 10] Just having a great time and I used to think that what the birds are saying early in the morning is let's go, let's get everything going, start the world and this morning thinking about this sermon I realized that the birds aren't saying that at all.

The birds are trying to tell us that while you were sleeping the Heavenly Father has been busy and if you will just stop and listen you'll know what He's doing and align with it. like the farmer we sow the seeds all day and then we go to sleep to begin a new day and we wake up with the day already going to watch and to wait especially to watch standing in tiptoe anticipation for new signs of the emerging kingdom of God.

this parable is teaching us then that fundamentally discipleship is spectatorship watching God unfold the mystery out of our control you want to say it again or can you out of our control.

Is this not what the world has witnessed the last decade in a profound and powerful way? Ten years ago who would have imagined or predicted what happened in Europe and what has happened with the old Soviet Union I never thought I would live to hear the word old in front of Soviet Union.

[20 : 05] I can still remember that day in 1989 when NBC was showing the fall of the Berlin Wall. You can still remember that can't you?

I couldn't believe my eyes. I grew up in Los Alamos New Mexico the center of the Cold War preparation and that Berlin Wall stood as an impenetrable sign of hostilities among peoples in the world.

No one ever imagined it coming down yet in a matter of days right before our eyes it crumbles symbolizing the other kinds of things that were going on behind the wall unknown to us.

I suppose the wisest among us should have anticipated something like that cataclysmic event arguing that the communist ideology being flawed at its center would inevitably implode in on itself. But no one ever dreamed that it would happen this way right? Did any of you dream that communism would end the way it has?

[21 : 16] Did any of you dream that? much of the credit of course was going to Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev and perhaps rightly so.

But would you agree with me that they were simply riding the crest of a wave the genesis of which their words and deeds had nothing to do?

Wouldn't it be actually more accurate to give the lion's share of the credit on a human level anyway to Lech Walesa? Lech Walesa is the Polish shipyard worker a disciple of Jesus Christ who went around sowing seeds of the kingdom.

Washington columnist Edward Njoder in an article published Christmas Eve of 1989 wrote this A labor leader appears in a Polish shipyard to all appearances a quite ordinary man whose demands seem absurdly ambitious given the odds.

Then Yoda writes this listen listen to this yet his vision outlasts prison and persecution because it is he not the powers he challenges who carries the germ of the future.

[22 : 40] I like that it's a powerful phrase the germ of the future to be a disciple of Jesus Christ is to be a germinator going around sowing germs of the future that will grow.

I like to also think that what set in motion the events that we have witnessed this last decade was the event in which Sharon and I and David and Christy were caught up in February of 1986 in Manila Philippines when millions of unarmed candy and crucifix carrying Filipinos gave Jesus upside down kingdom way a try and discovered that it is the most powerful way to bring upon redemptive social change.

Three million ordinary people into the streets I was there with them no guns no rocks no loud noise except the prayer meetings going on everywhere giving Jesus non-violent way a try and watching a violent wielding tyrant topple that event as you know was broadcast worldwide sowing seeds all over the world seeds of hope for other people under oppressive regimes but as everyone who was there in Manila will tell you that event caught everyone by surprise yes the disciples of the prince of peace had been sowing the kingdom seeds the germ of the future for a long time praying and preaching and feeding the hungry many like Ninoy Aquino doing so at the cost of his own life but even the most visionary even the most hopeful among us there were not prepared for the crop that emerged from the seeds that had been sown the farmer goes sows the seed and then he goes to bed at night and then wakes up and there without all of her fretting and stewing is the crop rich and full and vastly out of proportion to the tiny things she put into the soil well what is true for world

history is true for our individual histories seeds have been sown in our lives seeds powerfully sown by people that love us like my grandmother in my life germs of the future gestating and growing and we are being changed and we are being made new quite apart from ourselves the same is true for our children we sow the seeds one by one vacation

Bible school and Sunday school and day in and day out as we are home praying with them and doing their homework with them and quite apart from us then these seeds begin to germinate and grow in their lives and so too for our church seeds of the kingdom have been planted in the soil of GPC for a long time and some of them now are beginning to sprout some of them big time like the emerging ownership of the priesthood of all believers like worship as immediacy and intimacy like raising up a crop of teachers of the word and like becoming a center for healing and wholeness we farmers sow the seed and then go to bed and one day we wake up and there before us without our fretting and stewing is a crop vastly out of proportion to the tiny thing we planted in the soil

I want to conclude with a story told by Leslie Newbiggin who at one time was the bishop of the church of South India this story that I'm going to read he told at a Presbyterian mission gathering in Kansas City I know the punch line so I'm starting to grin he writes when I was bishop in Madurai I received a message asking me to go to a village which I'd never heard of before to baptize 25 families I went I sat down and spent a day with that group of people it took some time to piece the story together but when I'd finally gotten a hold of it it was a story in four acts act one a water resources team came to assess the village in digging a well so that they could have a clean water supply for the first time in their history the man in charge of this water project was a Christian he was not formally trained he was even theologically naive he was not good at communicating and verbalizing his faith but he made it clear that he was a

[27 : 40] Christian he left behind the impression of a good caring honest sincere man act two three or four months later one of the people in this village was visiting a neighbor town to do some shopping a representative of a Bible society sold him a copy of St.

Mark's Gospel the man brought it back and started reading it now reading in an Indian village means reading out loud so this man sits on the veranda of his house reading this strange book and of course people with nothing better to do gather people reading St.

Mark's Gospel which is totally strange to them they try to make out what it's all about act three along comes what we call independent evangelists we have a rather remarkable breed of such evangelists in South India each one is totally independent of any human agency each one has a hotline to God knows exactly what God attends and goes around villages preaching fiery sermons one of these independent sermon and left behind a track which simply said if you die tonight where will you go act three closes with alarm and despondency in the village act four the village decides they better do something about it they will try to find out what this Christian faith is all about they remember a village five miles away where there is a Christian congregation so they write and they ask the people tell us what this man Jesus is all about now these Christian people are village coolies they're day laborers one of them broke his leg he was unable to work so the people said you go to that village spend a month tell them what you have and so he did and the results of these acts was that

I was sitting down in front of 25 families of people as eager for the none of us knew about the four acts no agency of the church had any idea what was going on the strategy was entirely in other hands I could do nothing else but baptize them there and then no agency of the church had any idea what was going on the strategy was entirely in other hands we are not in control so I'm going to do something I'm going to invite you now to do a little exercise it won't hurt see it takes one to know one why can

I preach so firmly about control I know all about control I'm going to invite you to join me now in relinquishing control it's the hardest thing to do in life I'm going to invite you now to let go just for a moment to take your hands off you might want to do this with me take your hands off your children just take them off take your hands off your spouse take your hands off your relationships take your hands off your jobs take your hands off this church just for a moment and then turn them over and just for a moment entrust yourself your children your spouse your relationships your future the future of

[32 : 15] GPC the future of the world into those other hands it is after all ultimately not in our control