

How does it advance?

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[0 : 00] Today's reading is from Mark chapter 4, reading verses 1 to 20, and that's on page 1011 of your church Bibles. Again he began to teach beside the sea, and a very large crowd gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat in it on the sea, and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land.

And he was teaching them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them, Listen, a sower went out to sow, and as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it.

Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away.

Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. And other seeds fell into good soil, and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.

And he said, He who has ears to hear, let them hear. And when he was alone, those around him, Luke the twelve, asked him about the parables.

[1 : 18] And he said to them, To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything is in parables, so that they may indeed see, but not perceive, and may indeed hear, but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.

And he said to them, Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word, and these are the ones along the path where the word is sown.

When they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. And these are the ones sown on rocky ground. The ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy, and they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while.

Then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.

But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it, and bear fruit thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold. Thanks, Annie. Good morning, everyone.

[2 : 40] Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we thank you for this chance now to come to your word and to hear you speak to us.

And we pray that you would open our hearts to your word and your word to our hearts. And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, it's great. It's great to have you here. A particular welcome if you're visiting Grace Church. Perhaps you're looking into the Christian faith for the first time.

You're really welcome with us. We hope you will enjoy your time with us. And you will find if you come here regularly that we open the Bible every week.

We believe that it's through the Bible that God speaks. And that's why we work our way slowly. Generally speaking, we work our way slowly through Bible books. And that's what we're doing at the moment.

[3 : 39] We're working through this eyewitness account of Jesus' life in Mark's gospel. Today, we're not going to cover the whole passage. So next week, we'll come back to verses 10 to 12, the meaning of the parables.

We'll park that for a moment. We'll come back to that. And today, we're going to look at what the parable of the sower means. Many of us will know people who've been Christians for a bit, but then have given up on Christ.

Does that not suggest that there's something wrong with Christ or the Christian message? We'll also know many who've heard the gospel explained from almost every angle.

You know, they've read the Bible from cover to cover. They're not dim. They're bright. They're intelligent. But for whom it's all just make-believe nonsense.

Does that not suggest that there is something wrong with Christ or the Christian message? It's really hard, isn't it?

[4 : 51] I don't know if you find this. It's really hard when so many seem to hear the same thing. And it's people we love and respect.

But that actually, in the end, they don't believe it. Maybe you're here today and you've not yet believed in Jesus as your Lord and Savior.

You know it's true, but you have this nagging doubt. What about so many who don't believe it? Well, our subject to these four weeks is the advance of the kingdom of God in this age.

That's what Mark is talking about in chapters 3 and 4. The advance of the kingdom of God between Jesus, the Messiah's first coming, and then his return.

Last week, specifically, we saw that the kingdom advances through the word of the apostles. That is part of the answer.

[5 : 56] But Jesus, in chapter 4, expands on this. It will advance through the word, verse 14. Do you see that? Chapter 4, verse 14. The sower sows the word.

It will be a quiet revolution. It will advance unstopably, verse 20. There will be an inevitable harvest.

30-fold, 60-fold, 100-fold. There's no question. It will advance unstopably. But, and this is the point of the parable of the sower, we need to realize it will advance amidst much apparent failure.

Exponential growth. Exponential growth. But in the context of much apparent failure and waste.

If we don't realize that, we'll probably give up. Jesus tells this parable so that his disciples, his people, might keep going to the very end.

[7 : 06] Amidst, amidst all of this, apparent failure and waste. Why will the kingdom of God advance amidst apparent failure and waste?

Because the word, the gospel, is like a seed sown by God. Verse 14. The word is like a seed sown by God. That's the gospel.

But people are like soils. And there are different kinds of soil. That's the point. Well, let's look at these four responses in turn.

We should expect four different responses to the gospel, the word. Number one, the path. Just look at verse 15. These are the ones sown along the path where the word is sown.

When they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. Okay. How people respond to the gospel in the end, over a lifetime, that is the test.

[8 : 21] That is the acid test as to what soil they are. I remember reading through the whole of John's gospel with someone in the city a few years back now.

He was a lovely guy. Came every week. Good questions. Really engaging with what Jesus was saying. Over ten months or a year or so. But at the end of it all, well, it was like, it seemed like water off a duck's back.

Some seed will fall on the path where, in fact, there is no soil at all. I think we're to imagine here, soil number one, we're to imagine a hard-baked Mediterranean path, compacted almost like concrete.

A seed that falls there has no chance of germinating. Simply bounces off and sits there for a hungry bird to come and take advantage.

Many people, Jesus says, will come and hear the Christian message. There may well be interest and intrigue to start with.

[9 : 37] After all, everyone in this crowd, verse four, verse one, it's a very large crowd. It's a massive crowd. Literally, it's the biggest crowd in Mark so far. Everyone in this crowd had made the effort to come to listen to Jesus.

They'd put stuff down. They'd come along to hear him. This process of hearing the gospel message may be over a period of hours, days, weeks, or even years.

There is intrigue for seed number one, for soil number one. But there is never acceptance of what Jesus says, what the Bible says.

It is as if in the end, the seed bounces off a person's heart like a seed off concrete. But the point here is that for these people, the situation will go from bad to worse.

Do you see that in verse 15? That's the point. When they hear, Satan will come and snatch it away. Their refusal to accept the gospel gives Satan his opportunity.

[10:45] Satan who's prowling around, desperate to sabotage God's plans in some way. We saw last week that Satan is defeated.

He's bound. He's helpless. But it seems at the same time, he's allowed enough rope in this age to prowl around and snatch some seed away.

And that's what he's trying to do. What's all this about? Well, there is a warning here, I think, to anyone who is encountering the Christian message, but has not yet decided to do anything about it. You will not have endless chances to respond to the Son of God who loves you and died for you. If you will not listen or open yourself up to him, but instead resist him, though deep down, of course, you know what he's saying is true.

Well, you do have an enemy, Satan, who will happily come and take that gospel away so that your second situation is worse than the first.

[11:59] And you may never have the chance to respond to Jesus again. It is urgent. Tragically, there will be many for whom this is the case.

We see this around us. It seems to be the case. It explains how someone can seem to grow less and less receptive to the gospel over time.

Have you seen that? Note that the problem is not with the word, with the gospel. The gospel is true and the same for everyone, the seed.

Note that the problem is not with God and his generosity. God is generously scattering the gospel indiscriminately. The problem is with the soil of a hard heart and then made worse by Satan.

Importantly, this isn't the person that we know in our office or in our school who is apathetic to Jesus' message.

[13:12] He says, you know, I'm not interested, but hasn't really heard it. It's not that person because verse 15 says that the word has been sown in them.

Rather, it is the person who, when they do hear, but in the end, just nods and goes, that's interesting, but not for me.

Or I just don't think there could ever be enough evidence. Seems to grow less and less open to listening and never again turns to Christ.

Many will respond like that. But a caution here for us, I think. Jesus doesn't tell us this parable so that we can categorize individuals.

Definite individuals. You know, the prodigal son would have looked very like soil number one for a while until he came back. I don't think we know, in the case of any individual, what soil someone will turn out to be in the end.

[14:22] I don't think Jesus tells us the parable for that. But when we see people seeming to respond like this, and we know many will, we're not surprised.

Do we ever give up on an individual? No. Are we surprised when someone goes to the grave hard against the gospel?

No. Secondly, rocky ground. Verse 16 and 17.

These are the ones sown on rocky ground, the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy, and they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while. Then when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, they immediately fall away.

Sometimes people will receive the gospel with joy initially. They will say, yes, I believe. Jesus is compelling. I want the life that he gives.

[15:30] The church celebrates. They're baptized. Friends come and see that the weird change in this person's life. They go on as a Christian for a year or two, or maybe more.

They seem to make a great start, but, verse 17, when tribulation, literally, trouble, general word, a very general word, that when trouble arises, or persecution, or persecution, more specific, on account of the word.

In other words, because they're a Christian, because they're following Jesus, they wither spiritually and fall away. Do you notice there, trouble for being a Christian will certainly come, that word when,

not if, and it will usually come quickly.

It could come in a number of forms. Trouble is a very general word. I've taken a couple of examples. Chatting to a few of you recently.

Any secondary school girl, in this area at least, well, in this country, who wants to follow Christ openly, will soon find herself, on the outside of the social circle.

[16:54] What gender are you? Female. What? That's so dull. And she's disqualified, from the social group.

Who do you fancy? No one really. Waiting for marriage. What? You're so weird. A girl at a six, a six-year-old girl, at a nearby school.

The teacher asked the, it happened recently, the teacher asked the whole class, they said, if you think, the gospels are made up, go to that side of the room.

And if you think they're true, go over there. The whole class, goes over to that side of the room, except one six-year-old girl, who stays on that side of the room.

And then the teacher, interrogates the girl. Why do you believe this stuff? Some of us could take a leaf out of her book. Christian, school student, in RE, the teacher in front of the whole class, you don't really believe that stuff, do you?

[18:06] Christian university student, some of us know them, and he had his Bible graffitied by fellow students on 20 pages, bigot, homophobe, effing this, effing that.

Well, it'll happen in our families as well. Are you ready to be called those kinds of things? You're a teacher, teaching in one of the schools around here by your fellow teachers.

Trouble will come, even persecution. When it does, which soil will we prove to be? Tragically, many at that point will say, Christ and his promises.

They're not worth it. He's not worth the loss. The loss of comfort, the loss of relationships, loss of job prospects, loss of friends, loss of respectability, loss even of freedom.

And in their case, it is because there was only ever a shallow acceptance of Christ, shallow soil, a fair weather acceptance, as long as it doesn't cost me anything to have him.

[19:25] When we see this happening, which we will, it can really shake the believer. But there is nothing wrong with Christ and his promises.

There are just different kinds of soil. Don't misdiagnose the problem. What about you? What about me? When the heat comes, will we wither or persevere?

Let's pray. Lord, give me perseverance through trouble and persecution. The second soil. The third soil, among the thorns.

Verse 18. Others were sown among the thorns. They are the ones who hear the words, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word and it proves unfruitful.

So if the second seed, the pressure is external, so that the pressure for the second seed is coming from outside the sun, like the sun beating down, the heat of trouble.

[20:40] For the third seed, the threat is internal. It comes from within, from the heart. Cares, desires. I heard of a couple who were going very well as Christians, married couple, just chatting to someone a couple of weeks ago, but the time came when they decided to move house, bigger and better, more the dream.

But they did that with no consideration for a good church and when they found, when they got there, they found there wasn't anything and slowly over many years, their interest in Christ seemed to seep away.

They got divorced and now they wouldn't call themselves Christians. It's key to see the subtlety of what happens with the third seed.

Do you see that? It's all about subtlety. Verse 19, strangling, the choking of the word. So the strangling by weeds is a slow process.

I don't know if you've ever tried to watch a weed strangle something. You'd probably have to stay there for quite a long time. It doesn't happen quickly. It proves unfruitful in the end.

[21:55] It's a slow death. I think this contrasts with the second seed which is a dramatic rise and then a dramatic fall. With the third seed, everything happens slowly.

Many of us will know people who over many years have drifted away from a clear Bible-believing faith in Christ. We get these three weeds that can grow up in the heart.

Do you see that in verse 19? The cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, the desires for other things. Together, I think they are talking about an attachment to this world, but it's worth pausing on each one individually.

The cares of this world. That word cares is the same word that Jesus uses when he says, do not be anxious about what you should wear or what you should eat.

It's the same word that's used when the Bible says, cast your anxieties on the Lord. Literally, it is the anxieties, the worries of this age.

[23 : 03] And so there is a way in which someone's faith in Christ can be overwhelmed by the anxieties that are common to all who live in this broken, fallen world.

I think due to a fundamental unwillingness to leave behind the world, but the anxieties that can flow from that, the anxieties of life, anxieties about money, job, children, health, and on and on and on. The point here, I think, is that the normal anxieties of this life can take over and swamp and snuff out a once clear faith in Christ so that slowly he fades into the background along with his words and promises.

the cares of the world. The second weed that can grow up is the deceitfulness of riches. Notice the Lord Jesus singles out riches.

The other two are very general, cares and other things, but he singles out the deceitfulness of riches, this issue. Notice it is that riches are deceitful to the Christian.

[24 : 33] That is, riches and wealth, they do not shout they whisper to the Christian. It is not all at once, but bit by bit, you know, you just need a little bit more.

That's what riches love to whisper to the Christian. Oh, and they may clothe themselves in gospel reasons. Get me and you can say it's for Jesus.

They know all the tricks. riches. The deceitfulness of riches. Beware, therefore, the siren call of material possessions that can lead you yard by yard away from Christ.

I think it is a big temptation for many of us Christians in London to pursue a certain quality of life. life. What about that extension, this extension, this upgrade, year after year, stage by stage, the improvement of my quality of life?

[25 : 47] Can I ask, when you want something, do you always get it? Or it might be, there's nothing wrong with a bit more money, so I'm going to work towards that promotion, even though it's going to mean I can't make it to church or have much less time for other things.

Beware the deceitfulness of riches. They will strangle you. Over time, it may take years. I've heard some very helpful practical advice which has very much helped me over the years from someone who leads another church in London.

He said, do some weeding and he used this phrase, teach your savings a lesson. Teach your savings a lesson. Give some of them away.

God will look after you. Is there something you really want? The new, whatever it is. Why not wait? Instead of that new kitchen or whatever it is. Give the money away and see if you still want it in five years time. Are we saying that these things are bad necessarily?

[27 : 04] No, no, no. We're not saying these things are bad necessarily and we mustn't judge each other. It's a matter of the heart. for each individual to work out before the Lord. But beware.

If in doubt, pluck it up. And third worldly weed is the desires for other things. Very general, this is about the active desire for something in this world more than Christ.

So often this is relationships, isn't it? I think of a good friend of mine. We lived together when I was at St. Helens and he helped to lead a Bible study group for some years.

A wonderful Christian guy and a good friend. He was same-sex attracted. He knew he couldn't have Christ and his promises and the relationship that he was tempted towards.

He seemed to be going so well for years but then one day I got a message from him saying, I've got a boyfriend. We spent months trying to persuade him and to pray with him and for him but that desire for that relationship was too strong.

[28 : 19] Another person who was a minister at a church that we went to on placement in North London, Bible-believing, he was a curate there, Bible-believing, evangelical, trained at Oak Hill.

He went on to his, a lovely wife and daughter, went on to his next post to start as a vicar and we heard within a few months that he had left his wife and family and gone off with someone else and given up his faith.

It may be a relationship. It could be, it could be anything. For some, in the end, the love of this world and the things in it will slowly and surely strangle the gospel in someone's heart until there is no spiritual life left.

It is tragic. It's deeply sad. But the problem is not with Christ. The problem is not with the gospel. There are just different kinds of soils. And lastly and briefly, the good soil. We will spend more time on this next week. Verse 20.

[29 : 32] Those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit 30-fold, 60-fold, 100-fold.

The kingdom of God will advance and there will be an inexpressibly, exponentially large harvest of people in the end.

That's the maths, right? The fruit of four seeds sown will be at least 30, if not 60 or 100-fold in the end. God will have his harvest.

Through apparent waste and failure, God will have his harvest and he will have it through the lives lived of his true people, the good soil.

As we conclude, I think we should be left asking one question, an obvious question really.

[30 : 37] Which soil am I? Not which soil am I, but which soil are we? The answer on the one hand is time will tell.

the good soil must keep persevering through trials and temptations to the end. In each of our cases, therefore, time will tell which soil we are.

That's the answer on the one hand. The answer on the other hand is that Jesus tells this parable to the good soil so that we would be the good soil, not so that we wouldn't.

The other soils aren't listening. So if we are hearing this and listening and believing, if we want to be the good soil, that's a very good sign that we are, brother or sister.

So take heart and pray, Lord, please, would I be the good soil and bear fruit for you 30, 60, 100 fold.

[32 : 01] Well, let's pause there and why don't we have a few moments of silence as we respond personally to these words of Jesus. Dear Lord Jesus, we thank you that you tell this parable not so that we wouldn't but so that we would be the good soil.

Thank you for your grace, your generosity. Thank you for opening our eyes to the realities of your kingdom and how it advances. Thank you that we need not be discouraged when we see so many rejecting you because there's nothing wrong with you or the gospel, it's just there are different kinds of soil.

And Lord Jesus, how we pray that you would enable us to persevere through trials and to persevere through temptations.

And we ask that in the end each one of us would be the good soil who bears fruit thirty, sixty, a hundred fold for your glory.

And we ask it in your name. Amen. Amen.