

Kingdom Growth

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning. It's good to have you all here. I want to begin this morning by telling you the story of David and Svea Flood. In 1921, they sailed to become missionaries in Central Africa.

They had great zeal for the Lord. They desired to go beyond the safe mission compound into the places that had not yet been reached with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

They were rejected by the village that they chose to go live near. They could only talk to one boy who would come out and sell them chicken and eggs twice a week.

They suffered repeated attacks from malaria. Their co-workers found it too hard and left. Svea gave birth to a daughter, but weakened by her childbirth and malaria, she died.

David despaired, returned to the mission compound, handed his daughter over to other missionaries saying, I'm going back to Sweden. I've lost my wife.

[1 : 1 2] I obviously can't take care of this baby. God has ruined my life. He looked at his life, his hopes, his dreams of the kingdom of God.

Dashed. And he turned his back on God, a bitter man. Have you ever felt that disappointment? Have you ever wondered, God's kingdom doesn't look the way I think it should?

We feel this way on a global level today, don't we? We look, we read the news, we hear of war and famine. We hear of violence and sex trafficking and misogyny and factional strife across the globe.

And we think, God's kingdom? It's hard to see. We here in the West have a particular flavor of this because the idea of a Christianized West advancing no longer seems to be true.

Now, we need to be careful of this narrative because as a historian, I studied American history 200 years ago and America was not necessarily super more Christian than it was today in some ways.

[2 : 2 2] And yet, there is a truth that broadly, our culture was more shaped by values that come from a Christian worldview. And yet, today we live in Connecticut where 3% of the population will attend church regularly.

And it's true that we live in a culture where the values that have often been shared between the church and a society are changing. Some may be improving, but others are not.

And in the midst of this, we may be afraid. Where is God's kingdom? Is it losing? Maybe you've experienced personal disappointment.

Maybe you grew up with a lot of zeal with David Flood but have suffered hardships. You've come to faith out of a hard life, expecting relief, and you found that following Christ has not insulated you from the trials and sufferings.

Perhaps you're here this morning exploring Christianity, wondering, what is it that God has to offer in His kingdom? Where is the kingdom of God? What can I expect of it?

[3 : 36] It's a question, you know, that the people in the first century, particularly the Jewish people in the first century, the nation of Israel asked, as they lived under Roman rule, as they lived a disenfranchised state, as they wondered, where is God's kingdom here?

They had known the kingdom of David and Solomon in the past, its greatness, its glory, the temple, the palace, the army, everything.

And much of that was gone. Yet there were still those in the first century who expected the kingdom of God to come immediately, impressively, visibly, with political change, overthrowing Rome, and restoring the glory of a nation Israel.

It was in that context that Jesus came and ministered to us. And it's in that context that our passage this morning happens. We're continuing in our surf, in our walking through the gospel of Mark.

This is actually our second to last one before Advent. Goodness gracious. So this is, we're almost gonna, we're gonna take a break after next week. But we're in Mark chapter four in the Pew Bibles.

[4 : 51] It's page 788. If you wanna turn there with me. And as you turn there, what we're gonna see is two parables. Two parables that Jesus tells about the kingdom of God that answer some of the questions that we've raised this morning about what is the kingdom of God like.

So Mark chapter four, we're gonna read verses 26 through 34. If you're there with me, let's go ahead and read it. It'll be on the screen behind me as well.

Let's go ahead and read these passages. This passage together, these two parables, and then we'll explore it for a few minutes. And he, that is Jesus. And he said, the kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground.

He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows. He knows not how. The earth produces by itself first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear.

But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle because the harvest has come. And he said, with what can we compare the kingdom of God?

[5 : 59] Or what parables shall we use for it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which when sown in 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.

And 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. Let's pray together. God, we ask for your help this morning that we would understand this word. Lord, thank you for preserving it for us.

And we pray that by your spirit, you would give us ears to hear and hearts to receive your word. Lord, help me that I would speak as I ought. And Lord, help us to sit under your word this morning, we pray in Jesus' name.

Amen. In this passage, there are two parables. They're the centerpiece of it that describe what the kingdom of God is like. And at the end, we see themes that we're not gonna spend a lot of time talking about because it's what we've seen already in Mark.

[7 : 16] It said, Jesus is speaking parables as a way to speak to both the crowds and disciples at the same time. And privately, he would explain them to the disciples, but publicly, he would speak in parables as a way of calling their attention to, calling them to pay attention to his words and sifting out whether their hearts were really in a place to receive his word or whether they were in fact sitting in judgment of him or other things, which we've seen as this, we've seen that the different people in the crowds are responding differently to Jesus' teachings.

But he uses parables in a particular way to put forth truth, but in a way that for those who have ears, let them hear, is the phrase that he uses. And so we're gonna just spend our time today looking at these two parables that answer the question, what is the kingdom of God like?

And in the first parable in verses 26 through 29, we see that the kingdom of God is a sure and certain reality. Now, this is the second of three agricultural parables.

Pastor Nick preached last week on the parable of the sower, which is a longer parable. And this parable, verses 26 through 29, is actually the only parable unique to Mark.

All the other parables were recorded as well in the other synoptic gospels, but not this one. So that, it is what it is.

[8 : 44] So something for you to chew on. As we look at it, the point of the parable is this. As the man sows the seed, it grows.

Certainly and surely. Right? He goes out, according to the parable, he goes out and he sows the seed. And then, as you see, he sleeps and rises day and night, and the seed sprouts and grows.

He knows not how. This is not a picture of careful cultivation. He's not going every day and doing things to help this growth. He just says, the time passes and growth happens.

In fact, if you look at verse 28, it says, the earth produces by itself. This is, the earth produces automatically, is the English version of the Greek word there.

On its own, it does this. And this is a remarkable thing. Right? The kingdom of God advances on its own without our help.

[9 : 46] And as it happens, it produces, it progresses towards its desired goal. Right? Verse 28 says that it starts with, first the blade, then the kernel, and then the full ear of corn.

This is the picture that we're getting from Jesus. And so, it not only acts automatically, but it acts towards its purpose, towards its end goal.

And Jesus is saying, this is what the kingdom of God is like. The kingdom of God is a sure and certain thing.

The seed that is sown is most likely the word of the gospel. This is what we see back in verse 14 of chapter 4, as Jesus is telling his first parable about the seed.

We need to be careful. You don't always steal from one parable to find meaning in another. But it seems like it's a pretty reasonable, that the seed is the word of God being proclaimed, being spoken of in the nation of Palestine.

[10 : 51] And so, it reminds you, if you were, it reminds us of Isaiah 55 and what God says there about his word being spoken. Isaiah 55 10 says, For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return, but there water the earth, do not return there, but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth.

It shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it. The kingdom of God is a sure and certain thing because God is going to bring about what he is going to bring about.

It is, after all, his kingdom. It is the kingdom of God, not the kingdom of men, not even the kingdom of the church, but it is the kingdom of God that Jesus is talking to.

And he is reminding us that the kingdom of God is inevitable. Why is this good news for us? Well, because I think that we often struggle with fear.

We are afraid that God's kingdom isn't really going to happen. Certainly not without our help. Now look, we need to not overstate this because Christians are called to faithful labor.

[12 : 26] We are called to spend our lives, to pour it out, to serve God in every way that we can, the way that God has enabled us and gifted us and planted us in different places to serve him.

We are called to do that and to sow the word of the gospel wherever we are is a calling that we have. But we are not called to produce the fruit.

We are simply called to sow the seed and God will make it happen. You don't have to make the kingdom of God happen.

It is not up to you. And this is good news when we're afraid because when we're afraid that it's up to us, it does all sorts of things to us.

We're going to come back to that in a minute. Let's look at some other places in Scripture where we're reminded that this is true. The Apostle Paul, the great church planter, the one who did all the work in establishing the church, it seems like, in the book of Acts.

[13 : 30] And yet in 1 Corinthians chapter 3 verse 6, what does he say? He says, I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.

So we're reminded that what we're doing even here in church is not building our own little kingdoms. I'm of Paul.

I'm of Apollos. That's what was happening in Corinth was conflict as personalities, human actors in God's kingdom were claiming some kind of lordship or factional rule.

And Paul said, no, it's not like that at all because none of us can do the thing that we most want to see happen. We want to see God's kingdom happen, but we can't do that.

Only God can cause the growth. And what great news that is because it means it's not up to us.

[14 : 33] We can preach the gospel with freedom, with joy, with abandon. We can live with anticipation that God is at work in the world and that God is going to do what he wants to do in this season, in our lifetime, and throughout the scope of history.

But we know that this has a progression and an end because the seed sown will produce fruit. And God said, the kingdom of God is inevitable. It will happen and it will be brought about in the end.

And this is good news for us globally, organizationally, as a church. It's also good news for us personally. So the Apostle Paul reminds the Philippians of this in Philippians 1, 6.

I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion in the day of Christ Jesus. Maybe you fear that the kingdom of God is not going to happen in you in this lifetime.

That somehow it's up to you to get yourself over the hump. That somehow it's up to you to get through the trial or the hardship that you're facing. Paul reminds us that it's God who has taken hold of you.

[15 : 52] God who has planted the seed of the gospel in your heart. And he will bring it to completion on the day of Christ Jesus. And what great comfort that is. Friends, when we don't have this comfort, when we don't have this confidence that the kingdom of God is sure and certain, both out there and in here, we often live in fear.

And do you know what happens when we live in fear? We grasp. We grasp for power. We grasp for control. We try to force things to happen. We become desperate because we think it's up to us.

And when we don't see things happening on our time frame in art, we then think, well, the kingdom of God's not enough and God's not enough and I have to make this. So I'm going to go out into the world and find what works and I'm going to put all my trust in those things because God isn't doing.

We end up relying on ourselves and our techniques and our strategies rather than looking to God to build his kingdom. And I think Jesus knows this because I think that's why he goes to his second parable.

If the first parable is about the certainty and surety of God's kingdom, the second one is about the surprising nature of God's kingdom. It is surprising because it is small in appearance and great in impact.

[17 : 16] So he uses this image of a mustard seed. This is verses 30 through 32. He uses a mustard seed. Okay, for those of you who are technical, it's not the smallest seed in the world.

Oregano seeds are much smaller. But they're like one to two millimeters wide and there are 15,000 seeds in an ounce of mustard seed. Okay, so just, it's really small.

And just like today in the first century, it was proverbially the smallest thing around. Okay? And so Jesus is using a first century image that would have been known well to say this is the smallest thing in the world.

And yet it is planted. And the contrast is that this smallest seed produces the largest bush. Right? Oregano plants don't grow to 10 feet.

But mustard trees, bushes, do. I guess, in the Middle East at least. They grow to 10 feet tall. Right? And so Jesus is using this well-known imagery to make this contrast between the smallness, the seemingly insignificance of this little thing and the greatness of what it produces.

[18 : 26] Jesus says, this is what the kingdom of God is like. It starts small. It starts insignificantly.

And yet it grows into this great bush. This bush that recalls the imagery from Ezekiel 31 that we read earlier that is large enough to welcome not just a bird but many birds to come and nest in its branches and find shelter.

The kingdom of God that starts so small is going to be so big that it's going to welcome many comers from the outside. This is, of course, the model of the church that God uses seemingly in the eyes of the world insignificant things to accomplish great things for Him.

So again, in 1 Corinthians, we're reminded, Paul writes this, God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.

God chose what is low and despised in the world even things that are not to bring to nothing things that are so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

[19 : 42] And because of Him, you are in Christ Jesus who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption so that, as it is written, let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.

God chooses the insignificant things of the world and even the things that are not to shame the things that are so that we might see that the kingdom of God comes by the work of God.

Right? And again, we may think, we may think that we need the slickest programs or the biggest bank account. We may think that we need the most cultural power or political control.

We may think that we need the most impressive people that we can collect for the kingdom of God to come about. But Jesus reminds us in this parable that for the kingdom of God to flourish, it needs only a mustard seed.

Something small and insignificant. something that has no wisdom in the eyes of the philosophers, has no power in the eyes of the miracle workers. But as he said in 1 Corinthians, Jesus Christ crucified is the wisdom of God and the power of God.

[21 : 02] For friends, this is the very heart of the gospel that we've believed in. That Jesus, who though he could claim all glory, made himself insignificant. insignificant.

He took on human form. He was born as a baby in mean estate, as the hymn says, right? Wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. He ministered in obscurity. He didn't create an institution. He didn't write a book. He left a band of scared, scattered followers.

believers. And he died in social disgrace. There is no reason to think in the annals of history that Jesus would be anything else. And for those of us who are in the church and see the world through the history of church, it's kind of hard to believe.

But all you have to do is go over to one of those institutions right around the corner who's going to teach history where it's not a big deal. The church is not a big deal. It is insignificant insignificant in the world in what is, in how the world has progressed and where we are now and where we are going.

[22 : 17] But God raised this insignificant one from the dead. And the kingdom foes of sin and death were defeated and the sentence against evil was rendered and good had conquered.

And Jesus is the place where we know that the kingdom of God has conquered and it is certain and it is sure. Because he has risen from the dead, we know this is happening.

And we know that it will be one day finally accomplished. When he returns, he will bring the fullness of his kingdom and we will see it in all of its glory.

And it will be a beautiful thing. So the kingdom of God begins in insignificance. And it grows.

And one day we will see its glory. And we see this in some ways. Because that mustard seed that has become a plant is now, if this refers to the church and the growth of the church in this age as we're waiting for the fullness of the kingdom, if the church is the primary expression of the kingdom of God, there are birds from every tribe and tongue and nation coming to find rest and comfort in the shelter of the gospel and the good news about Jesus Christ in the church all over the world.

[23 : 39] And friends, we might even be so bold as to say we can see it here at Trinity. This church that was not a church 50 years ago and 30 years ago was a small and struggling church.

And yet God has seen fit as the seed has been sown to continue to build it for the good of many who are a part of this. And look, churches aren't the kingdom of God.

Individual churches, churches sometimes grow and then die. But the church universal has continued to grow and advance. Not perfectly, but has continued to grow.

Friends, this is what David Flood found out as well. the boy who sold them chicken and eggs, he heard the gospel.

After the floods left, he went to his village and he shared with them the message that he'd heard from these strangers who had come to live near them for a short period of time.

[24 : 51] And that daughter was adopted by other missionaries, raised, one day found out what had happened to her birth parents, to her birth mother.

She tracked down what happened to this boy and she found out that that boy had gone back and the village had believed and he was now, she met him at a conference where he was now the national head of a Christian Sunday school program that had over 110,000 people in it.

She tracked down her dad. She said, dad, God's been good to us. And he said, no, he's not.

He's ruined our lives. And she told him the story and God redeemed him and that day he repented of his bitterness because he got a taste of the certainty of what Jesus wants us to know that the kingdom of God, though small and insignificant, is certain and it is sure and we can bank on it and we can spend our lives trusting in it and looking for it because of the gospel.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for this word. Lord, we pray this morning that you would help us to not be afraid but to have faith, to trust in you and in this word that, Lord, the kingdom that you have begun, Lord, you will bring to fruition.

[26 : 43] Lord, we pray that you would help us to have this hope. Lord, in the midst of the trials that we face and the discouragements that we feel, Lord, to know that your kingdom is certain. Lord, gives us great strength to persevere. May it be true in us, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.