



## The Gospel of Mark - Chapter Four

### II. Mark 1:14-8:26 - Demonstration of Jesus' Authority (continues)

#### II.b Mark 3:13-6:6a - Jesus' later Galilæan ministry (continues)

##### Summary of Chapter Four

The first half of this chapter is given over to the well known Parable of the Sower, an agricultural analogy that indicates the Word of God, in the form of seed, can be sown into four differing soil types, each representing a state of the human heart. Jesus gave his disciples an explanation of this parable, demonstrating that what happens to each person who hears the Word of God will be dependent upon the state of their heart when they hear it.

The second parable is about not hiding the light of a lamp but revealing it. This is what disciples are called to do, to reflect the light of Christ that is in their hearts through what they do and say to all who are around them. They are not to keep it hidden by remaining silent when they should speak out, or by living a life that better conforms to the world around them.

The agricultural theme is then resumed with the idea that the Kingdom of God is like seed that is planted in well prepared soil. From then onwards, it will grow continually without any intervention by the farmer needed. It will take on a life of its own. Although the farmer may tend his crops he cannot stop the process nor does he fully understand it.

The Parable of the Mustard Seed is a similar analogy to show that the Kingdom of God was introduced with small, humble beginnings, i.e. the smallest of seeds was planted, but it will continue to grow to become the largest of trees in the garden, or the world, so that all the birds of the air, those who come to faith in Christ, can take refuge in its branches. Mark then states that Jesus taught many more parables, the details of which he does not include.

After this, Jesus was being transported across the Sea of Galilee in a fishing boat and fell asleep due to his fatigue, when a violent storm arose, so fierce

that even the experienced fishermen feared for their lives. In their fear, they ran to Jesus for help. He got up, calmed the storm instantly with a word and then rebuked his disciples for their lack of faith.

## II.b.ii. Mark 4:1-34 - Parables

Jesus taught in parables both as judgment against those outside his newly formed messianic community of faith, and as a means of instruction for those inside. This was not the only form of teaching used by Jesus but was a favoured way of making a point to those who could comprehend such teaching.

### II.b.ii.1 Mark 4:1-20 - The Parable of the Sower

Although famously called the Parable of the Sower, most modern translations refer to him as the farmer, who appears to be the least important component of the entire parable in many respects. However, the farmer relates primarily to Jesus and subsequently to those called to proclaim the Word of God, and it is essential that all such people, whether they do so in a formal message format in a church meeting, or informally elsewhere, are required to do so accurately, truthfully and faithfully; thus making them a key component of the whole process.

Of real importance is the Word of God itself, represented here by the seed, and then the condition of the human heart of those listening to the proclamations, represented here by the various soil types.

<sup>1</sup> Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge.

#### Mark 4:1

Began to teach by the lake. As noted before, this was a favourite place for Jesus to teach, as it allowed more space for the large crowds that he always attracted.

He got into a boat. Although Jesus did not mind being jostled by the crowds, it was less easy for him to teach people in such conditions. By being out on the lake, a short distance from the shore, he would be able to speak clearly enough for all the people who had gathered along the shore at the water's edge to hear him.

Sat in it. As with modern day church services, it would be normal for the preacher to be stood while delivering his message. However, in group teaching it was traditional for the teacher to be seated with his listeners gathered around him. This was confirmed by the complimentary account of this occasion in Galilee: <<**He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat**>> (Luke 5:3), and in Jerusalem: <<**At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them**>> (John 8:2), supported by: <<**In that hour Jesus said to the crowd, "Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I sat in the temple courts teaching, and you did not arrest me**>> (Matthew 26:55).

<sup>2</sup> He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said:

### Mark 4:2

He taught them many things by parables. Mark provides several examples of Jesus' teaching in parables, although he taught many more than are recorded here. To the hard-hearted, parables are a warning; to those who are open-minded, parables illustrate principles of the messianic rule of God.

A parable is Jesus' means of communicating truth through a narrative analogy in order to teach a moral or spiritual lesson. His parables produce very different results in different people: they hide truth from the crowd, while they communicate truth to the disciples. Luke provides many more examples of Jesus teaching in parables. A parable consists of a story and its corresponding intended message.

<sup>3</sup> "Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed.

### Mark 4:3

Listen! - A simple command, but one worthy of attention. Disciples need to do more than just read or hear God's Word; they need to do all they can to understand it, whether by attending bible study classes, spending time with other Christians or reading well-researched commentaries.

A farmer went out to sow. Using a common farming method of that time, the farmer sows the seed without first ploughing the ground. Thus the seed fell on various kinds of soil that had not been prepared to receive the seed. This indicates that preaching the Gospel is something that does not have to be done to a target audience, although yields can be greater from those who have been through some preparation, such as an Alpha course, but it can be proclaimed almost randomly to anyone who wishes to listen: **<<how blessed you will be, sowing your seed by every stream, and letting your cattle and donkeys range free>>** (Isaiah 32:20), for no one knows who it is who will truly hear! The whole purpose of scattering the seed is to see an increase in yield.

**It should be noted that, in order to avoid wasting valuable resources and effort, the workers need to be trained and the field prepared through prayer, at least, before the seed is randomly scattered: <<When a farmer ploughs for planting, does he plough continually? Does he keep on breaking up and working the soil? When he has levelled the surface, does he not sow caraway and scatter cumin? Does he not plant wheat in its place, barley in its plot, and spelt in its field? His God instructs him and teaches him the right way>> (Isaiah 28:24-26). When the time is right, the worker should not be put off by anything for: <<Whoever watches the wind will not plant; whoever looks at the clouds will not reap. As you do not know the path of the wind, or how the body is formed in a mother's womb, so you cannot understand the work of God, the Maker of all things. Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening let your hands not be idle, for you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well>> (Ecclesiastes 11:4-6). After all, it is all about faith: <<Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and**

*increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness>> (2 Corinthians 9:10).*

<sup>4</sup> As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up.

#### Mark 4:4

The birds came and ate it up. There are similar references to birds in Scripture. Consider: <<*Jesus replied, Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head*>> (Luke 9:58), <<*It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air perched in its branches*>> (Luke 13:19), and in Peter's vision in Joppa of a sheet from heaven: <<*It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air*>> (Acts 10:12). Jesus would later explain this parable to his disciples. In v.15 he points out that it is Satan, represented by the birds, who is taking the Word away from this group of people.

<sup>5</sup> Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. <sup>6</sup> But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. <sup>7</sup> Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain.

#### Mark 4:5-7

Jesus explained these analogies to his disciples in vv.14-19.

<sup>8</sup> Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times.”

#### Mark 4:8

Jesus concluded his explanation of this passage in v.20, where he explains that the **good soil**, represents a receptive human heart, facilitating the growing, increasing, and yielding of much fruit.

Multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times. Typical agricultural yields ranged from about five to fifteen times the amount of seed planted, with a tenfold yield considered a good crop, although some historical reports tell of extraordinary yields up to a hundredfold, such as: <<*Isaac planted crops in that land and the same year reaped a hundredfold, because the Lord blessed him*>> (Genesis 26:12), where hundredfold fruit represents a true blessing of an awesome God.

**If the four types of soil evenly spread across the population listening that would give people, or listeners at least, a one in four chance of coming to faith. In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, especially in the western hemisphere, having one in four come to church would be seen as revival!**

<sup>9</sup> Then Jesus said, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.”

## Mark 4:9

Having ears to hear involves surrender of proud self-reliance and submission to God, not just hearing what he says but comprehending it as well, as the prophet has stated: <<*Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed*>> (Isaiah 6:10), <<*Lead out those who have eyes but are blind, who have ears but are deaf*>> (Isaiah 43:8), and: <<*They know nothing, they understand nothing; their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see, and their minds closed so they cannot understand*>> (Isaiah 44:18).

It needs to be remembered that it is not sufficient just to hear the Word of God, for the Lord's brother writes: <<*Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says*>> (James 1:22). One way is to earnestly seek God: <<*For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them*>> (Isaiah 58:2).

<sup>10</sup> When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables.

## Mark 4:10

When he was alone. It seems there were few opportunities when the crowds were not pressing in on Jesus demanding healings, questioning him, debating with him or just wanting him to tell them more of the Kingdom that he was heralding in.

Those disciples who were with the Twelve apostles, as designated in Mark 3:14, received insight into the content of Jesus' parables.

<sup>11</sup> He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables

## Mark 4:11

Many parables illustrate aspects of the secret of the Kingdom of God, i.e. the nature of the rule of God over individuals and the community of God. The mysteries of how the Kingdom of God would operate are revealed to the disciples but withheld from the spiritually unresponsive crowd. In particular, these secrets of the Kingdom of God explained its partial and preliminary manifestations in Jesus' day as it was breaking into the world, in advance of its full and final appearing at the end of the age, when Jesus will return to claim his inheritance. Those who do not yet participate in the messianic community are considered to be on the outside.

<sup>12</sup> so that,

“they may be ever seeing but never perceiving,  
and ever hearing but never understanding;  
otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!”

### Mark 4:12

Ever seeing but never perceiving, ever hearing but never understanding. Since this quotation from Isaiah 6:9-10 describes the hard-heartedness of Israel, its citation here, taken from the Septuagint or Greek version of the OT, emphasises the fact that Jesus spoke in parables to outsiders as a form of prophetic warning. Jesus warned of the serious consequences for all, both Gentiles and Jews, who will not open their hearts to him. And yet, there is always an opportunity for repentance in each and every generation. Refer also to comments made on v.33.

<sup>13</sup> Then Jesus said to them, “Don’t you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?”

### Mark 4:13

Don’t you understand this parable? Jesus’ tone is one that seems to say this is a relatively simple parable to comprehend. If disciples fail to understand this one then they will have no idea what Jesus is saying when he introduces those that are obscure in their meaning and application. This is alluded to by the prophet: <<*If you have raced with men on foot and they have worn you out, how can you compete with horses? If you stumble in safe country, how will you manage in the thickets by the Jordan?*>> (Jeremiah 12:5).

How then will you understand? Jesus hints that even the disciples may suffer from hard heartedness, closed minds, blind eyes and blocked up ears: <<*Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked them: “Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don’t you remember?”*>> (Mark 8:17-18).

<sup>14</sup> The farmer sows the word.

### Mark 4:14

The farmer in the parable (vv.4-8) primarily represents Jesus but in a secondary sense every faithful preacher of the Gospel. The various soils represent human hearts; and the inhospitable hearts in the parable gradually become more receptive, moving from indifferent to opportunistic to very interested, but nevertheless remain preoccupied with the cares of their present life in rebellion toward God’s true purposes, whether intentionally or otherwise. The good soil represents a consistently attentive and accepting heart, someone who has a desire and willingness to receive God into their life.

<sup>15</sup> Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them.

### Mark 4:15

Basically, these people are not in a place to receive the Word for the worldly attractions are just too much, making it easy for Satan, in the form of birds (v.4), to take away the Word that was spoken to them. It is not that it doesn’t make

sense, it just doesn't fit with the way they believe they should be living their lives, or, at least, the way they have chosen to live their lives, whether they believe it is right or not.

<sup>16</sup> Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. <sup>17</sup> But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.

#### Mark 4:16-17

Seed sown on rocky places is an analogy to rock lying beneath a thin layer of soil so that no plant can take proper root, where it is more likely that Jesus is referring to an unreceptive human heart. The person appears to be in the right frame of mind to receive and accept the Word of God, and receive it with joy. However, their spiritual perception is too shallow, that is, their faith cannot form a strong root in their heart that can be nurtured and grown into mature faith. Therefore, as soon as some form of testing because of the Word comes into their lives, they have nothing to fall back on and they quickly fall away from the faith.

That they have no root is a similar analogy to footprints in the wet sand of a tidal beach. They seem well founded until the next tide wipes away all trace that they were ever there!

Before Jesus came, John the Baptist prepared the way and there were many people who responded to him in the way that Jesus is explaining here. For example, there were many who heard John's word and received it with joy for: *<<John was a lamp that burned and gave light, and you chose for a time to enjoy his light>>* (John 5:35), although in the end it was the way the prophet had indicated it would be: *<<Indeed, to them you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for they hear your words but do not put them into practice>>* (Ezekiel 33:32).

When trouble or persecution comes. Jesus does not say if, for it is a certainty in this life that all believers will be tested from time to time, and for some it seems like it is all the time. This should be expected and was never kept hidden from people from the outset of the Gospel proclamation. Paul confirms this: *<<Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory>>* (Romans 8:17), and again: *<<For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ>>* (2 Corinthians 1:5). This is something that should not be kept from those who come to faith. If they know they will undergo trials from the outset, they have more chance of enduring them when they do come. However, there are some people who try to portray discipleship as a panacea for all ills, with Jesus like a lucky charm or mascot, to ward off any harmful influences. Jesus came to proclaim the truth: *<<“You are a king, then!” said Pilate. Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me”>>* (John 18:37). Therefore, Jesus requires his followers to speak the truth also.

<sup>18</sup> Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; <sup>19</sup> but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful.

#### Mark 4:18-19

Seed sown among thorns. This reflects the type of Christian who likes to be part of a church and truly believes they are being a good disciple of Christ, but are either too tied up in their own lives and careers, building personal prosperity and gathering possessions, or they are the type that choose to worry about all sorts of things that they generally have no control over, something that is directly conflicting to the teaching of Christ. Either way, their response is that they become unfruitful, failing to fulfil the potential that God has given them through the Spiritual gifts he has imparted on them.

The deceitfulness of wealth. There are so many people that believe having plenty of money is the source of happiness. It can be; but it can also be a source of stress, greed, and even discontentment for those who always want more, and even unhappiness for those who find they have attracted the wrong sort of 'friends'. Paul writes: <<*For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs*>> (1 Timothy 6:10), so people need to be aware of this added danger.

This passage in no way speaks out against having a good career, being wealthy or being in possession of lots of nice things. After all God created all good things and Jesus came that we might have an enjoyable and fulfilled life: <<*The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full*>> (John 10:10). God simply calls us to be good stewards of what we have, share it with those who do not have even the basic necessities, and always to give God the glory for what we have in our own lives.

<sup>20</sup> Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop – some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown.”

#### Mark 4:20

Seed sown on good soil. This represents the people who not only accept Jesus as their Lord and Saviour, but willingly accept the persecution and trouble that will inevitably accompany it. It is not that they would necessarily welcome suffering but when it comes, they do accept it, even with joy, for it shows them to be worthy of Christ's trust in them, such as: <<*The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name*>> (Acts 5:41), so too Paul: <<*Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church*>> (Colossians 1:24). Such disciples are the ones who then help to produce the multiplied yield of fruit for God.

Some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times refers to the yield of the crop or fruitfulness in a person's discipleship walk. It was commented on in v.8.

Good seed on good soil will produce good fruit, fruit that will last. What should be noted in all the examples given is that, in the cases where the heart is not right to receive the Word of God, it is the fault of the person, not a problem with the Word, for that remains true, providing it is spoken in truth!

#### II.b.ii.2 Mark 4:21-25 - A Lamp on a Stand

This is sometimes referred to as 'The Parable of the Lamp'. Disciples of Christ are called to be the light of the world that is Christ, so that through them and their lifestyle choices, the glory of Christ will be revealed. This will then attract non-believers with receptive hearts to seek God for themselves.

The proclamation of the Kingdom of God, his rule and presence, is like bringing an oil lamp into a room; the coming messianic rule of God will make the hidden things, e.g. a hard heart, hidden sin, hypocrisy, etc. apparent and indeed public.

<sup>21</sup> He said to them, "Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don't you put it on its stand? <sup>22</sup> For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open.

#### Mark 4:21-22

If believers do not hide the light of their lamp, i.e. the message they have heard, but proclaim it for others by bringing it out into the open, for: <<*The human spirit is the lamp of the Lord that sheds light on one's inmost being*>> (Proverbs 20:27), then whatever is hidden will be disclosed as it should be.

Disciples of Christ are called to live their lives as the light of the world, not as the person described by Elton John, who was a Candle in the Wind, which describes the type of person who does not know Christ, 'never knowing who to turn to when the rain sets in'. Christ is not a crutch, as some might think, but he is always there in times of trouble.

Whatever is concealed will also be brought out into the open. Jesus was ultimately speaking about the final judgment, although Gospel proclamation and Gospel ministry in this age are like a lamp that illuminates and drives away dark areas of sin before that final judgment.

<sup>23</sup> If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear."

#### Mark 4:23

Ears to hear is an exhortation to understand and heed the parable as confirmed in v.9, Matthew 11:15, 13:9 and 13:43; and again in Luke 8:8 and 14:35. Some 50-60 years later, Jesus would instruct John to use a similar phrase in all the letters he wrote to the seven churches in Asia, as recorded in Revelation Chapters 2 and 3, e.g. <<*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches*>> (Revelation 2:7a). It is often taken to imply that there are some who will perceive the Word and others that do not. It can also be taken as a call to give

the Gospel a fair hearing and then to look further into it before coming to a conclusion not to heed it, as some are given to do.

<sup>24</sup> “Consider carefully what you hear,” he continued. “With the measure you use, it will be measured to you – and even more.

#### Mark 4:24

Consider carefully what you hear. It is important for people to weigh up the Word of God and ensure they have understood it properly and fully. This is particularly important for anyone who then wishes to teach others the Word, for to teach incorrectly could cause serious spiritual damage to others and, indeed, to the one proclaiming it!

Measure refers to the attitude with which the Word of Jesus is being received. If the hearer embraces Jesus’ Gospel message of the Kingdom in a rich and profound way, then still more will be measured to you; that is, God will take up residence in that heart and give increased understanding and blessing, i.e. even more, both in this age and in the age to come.

The latter part of this verse also shows that if the hearer is a faithful servant they can expect Christ to be a faithful master. As the disciple grows in the Word and the outcomes of it, be it faithful teaching or other aspects of ministry, then God will impart even more gifts on that person to allow them to increase even further; in many ways, it is a passage about an individual’s spiritual growth.

<sup>25</sup> “Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.”

#### Mark 4:25

The paradox in this verse reinforces the point in the previous one: the person who welcomes God’s rule and presence will be given more of God’s intended fruit (vv.13-20); the one who depends on his own resources without receiving the Word, is the one who does not have, and he will lose it, for even what they have will be taken from them.

Although this is generally seen as applying to unbelievers, a second aspect of taken from them could be that, when disciples of Christ do not fully utilise and maximise the gifts they have been given through appropriate ministry, their gifts will be withdrawn from them.

#### II.b.ii.3 Mark 4:26-29 - The Parable of the Growing Seed

As the farmer sleeps and rises, the fruit grows by itself using the Greek *automatē*, which means automatically; that is, without any human effort or intervention. Fruit for God’s Kingdom grows from soil that is hospitable to his Word.

First the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel (v.28), went against the popular expectation at the time of Jesus that God’s Kingdom would come suddenly and all at once. Jesus teaches that the messianic rule of God commenced inconspicuously,

growing slowly but steadily in the midst of much adversity, and will reach its glorious culmination point at the Second Coming of Jesus. This passage offers great hope to those who believe.

<sup>26</sup> He also said, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground.

#### Mark 4:26

Jesus started this analogy on the Kingdom of God by continuing the common agricultural theme that would have been familiar to his listeners and easy to follow in that culture, at least for those who had ears to hear!

<sup>27</sup> Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. <sup>28</sup> All by itself the soil produces grain – first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head.

<sup>29</sup> As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”

#### Mark 4:27-29

Though he does not know how. This is a simple, innocuous statement that shows that man is not necessarily as clever as he thinks he is. Man has gained all sorts of knowledge and come up with marvellous technological solutions. However, they sometimes fail to realise that so much just happens without them knowing about it or being involved in the process. This should be quite humbling for most people, as it was when Job was brought down a peg or two: <<**Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand**>> (Job 38:4).

Night and day, the seed sprouts and grows, all by itself. This analogy shows just how the Kingdom of God would propagate around the world, as the Word spread and was accepted. It becomes like a living thing that grows and propagates itself, although in reality it does require faithful servants to act as stewards to marshal and facilitate the growth. However, the real church remains outside of the control of man and in the hands of the Lord, such are the mysteries of the Godhead: for example the Spirit: <<**The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit**>> (John 3:8), and Paul marvels: <<**Beyond all question, the mystery from which true godliness springs is great: He appeared in the flesh, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory**>> (1 Timothy 3:16).

Whether he sleeps or gets up. Night time can often be a time for visions when God speaks to those he wishes to hear from him: <<**In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls on people as they slumber in their beds, he may speak in their ears and terrify them with warnings**>> (Job 33:15-16).

All by itself. The Word of God lives forever, whether it is preached or not: <<**Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away**>> (Matthew 24:35), and has always done so: <<**Where are your ancestors now? And**

*the prophets, do they live forever? But did not my words and my decrees, which I commanded my servants the prophets, overtake your ancestors? “Then they repented and said, ‘The Lord Almighty has done to us what our ways and practices deserve, just as he determined to do’”>> (Zechariah 1:5-6).*

First the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As already indicated, this represents the way that the Kingdom of God will grow and spread, slowly from humble beginnings, a baby born in a manger, through many years of trial and testing until finally the King comes to claim his Kingdom, not just a renewed kingdom of Israel, but a universal kingdom, where Christ will reign, for: *<<It is written: “As surely as I live,’ says the Lord, ‘every knee will bow before me; every tongue will acknowledge God’”>> (Romans 14:11).*

Sickle and harvest are metaphors for the last judgment: *<<Swing the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Come, trample the grapes, for the winepress is full and the vats overflow – so great is their wickedness!>> (Joel 3:13), as well as: <<Then another angel came out of the temple and called in a loud voice to him who was sitting on the cloud, “Take your sickle and reap, because the time to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is ripe.” So he who was seated on the cloud swung his sickle over the earth, and the earth was harvested. Another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. Still another angel, who had charge of the fire, came from the altar and called in a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle, “Take your sharp sickle and gather the clusters of grapes from the earth’s vine, because its grapes are ripe.” The angel swung his sickle on the earth, gathered its grapes and threw them into the great winepress of God’s wrath>> (Revelation 14:15-19).*

The harvest has come. In the natural world there is a short season to harvest the crop when it is ripe. With Christ, the harvest can be reaped anytime he calls: *<<Don’t you have a saying, ‘It’s still four months until harvest’? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest>> (John 4:35).* Those who belong to Christ will be stored in his barn, the rest will be discarded: *<<Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn>> (Matthew 13:30).*

#### II.b.ii.4 Mark 4:30-34 - The Parable of the Mustard Seed

This is another parable representing the growth of the Kingdom of God. It contrasts the Kingdom’s modest beginning and its glorious final state.

<sup>30</sup> Again he said, “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? <sup>31</sup> It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. <sup>32</sup> Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.”

## Mark 4:30-32

A third and final parable of the Kingdom points out that the messianic rule of God begins in a small and unnoticed way; this is different from what was popularly expected, as Israel had hoped for a warrior King to drive out her oppressors and restore them to the glorious days of David and Solomon. This was still the view of the apostles until they witnessed the ascension and then received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, finally realising the reality of Christ: *<<Then they gathered around him and asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”>>* (Acts 1:6).

Its beginning is likened to a mustard seed, which was the smallest of all the seeds but could produce a bush as large as 3ft by 12ft or 0.9m by 3.7m. The metaphor emphasises small beginnings and gradual but remarkable growth.



For the birds can perch in its shade, (the grown bush), points to divine blessing, for faithful disciples can rest in the cool shadow of God's watchful care:

*<<One day the trees went out to anoint a king for themselves. They said to the olive tree, ‘Be our king.’ “But the olive tree answered, ‘Should I give up my oil, by which both gods and humans are honoured, to hold sway over the trees?’ “Next, the trees said to the fig tree, ‘Come and be our king.’ “But the fig tree replied, ‘Should I give up my fruit, so good and sweet, to hold sway over the trees?’ “Then the trees said to the vine, ‘Come and be our king.’ “But the vine answered, ‘Should I give up my wine, which cheers both gods and humans, to hold sway over the trees?’ “Finally all the trees said to the thorn bush, ‘Come and be our king.’ “The thorn bush said to the trees, ‘If you really want to anoint me king over you, come and take refuge in my shade; but if not, then let fire come out of the thorn bush and consume the cedars of Lebanon!’>>* (Judges 9:8-15), *<<Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, “He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust”>>* (Psalm 91:1-2), and finally: *<<This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will take a shoot from the very top of a cedar and plant it; I will break off a tender sprig from its topmost shoots and plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain heights of Israel I will plant it; it will produce branches and bear fruit and become a splendid cedar. Birds of every kind will nest in it; they will find shelter in the shade of its branches. All the trees of the forest will know that I the Lord bring down the tall tree and make the low tree grow tall. I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish>>* (Ezekiel 17:22-24).

**This analogy might seem similar to King Nebuchadnezzar's tree:** *<<These are the visions I saw while lying in bed: I looked, and there before me stood a tree in the middle of the land. Its height was enormous. The tree grew large and strong and its top touched the sky; it was visible to the ends of the earth. Its leaves were beautiful, its fruit abundant, and on it was food for all. Under it*

*the wild animals found shelter, and the birds lived in its branches; from it every creature was fed>> (Daniel 4:10-12). The key difference is that his vision was one of a kingdom that was about to collapse after it reached its peak; the Kingdom of God is one that will always continue to grow in mighty splendour.*

The Kingdom did indeed start with small beginnings, with a family of Hebrews going into Egypt: *<<After this, Joseph sent for his father Jacob and his whole family, seventy-five in all>> (Acts 7:14), then those in a small upper room after the ascension of Christ: <<In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty)>> (Acts 1:15), and in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century it is believed that around 3 billion people in history have come into the Kingdom of God. That's a lot of people, but clearly not yet enough. The prophet had said: <<"Who dares despise the day of small things, since the seven eyes of the Lord that range throughout the earth will rejoice when they see the chosen capstone in the hand of Zerubbabel?">> (Zechariah 4:10). From a single grain a great Kingdom has come forth, but a high price was paid for it: <<Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds>> (John 12:24).*

<sup>33</sup> With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand.

#### Mark 4:33

Unlike the other two synoptic Gospels, which record more of Jesus' parables in depth, Mark provides mere excerpts of Jesus' parabolic teaching on the Word of the messianic Kingdom of God. Jesus used parables to warn his opponents, who might yet turn to him as they were enabled to hear and understand it.

There were many occasions both during Jesus' ministry and even up to the time of his ascension, that the apostles did not fully comprehend what Jesus was telling them: *<<They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise." But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it>> (Mark 9:30-32), as well as: <<Jesus went on to say, "In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me." At this, some of his disciples said to one another, "What does he mean by saying, 'In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me,' and 'Because I am going to the Father?'" They kept asking, "What does he mean by 'a little while'? We don't understand what he is saying">> (John 16:16-18), but Jesus knew and understood this. On his last evening he went on to explain: <<I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come>> (John 16:12-13).*

<sup>34</sup> He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.

## Mark 4:34

Despite their lack of understanding on several occasions, Jesus still privately helped his own disciples to understand and receive what he was teaching, for he explained everything to them.

He did not say anything to them without using a parable is a broad generalisation meaning that he regularly included parables whenever he taught; it does not mean he spoke or taught only in parables.

### II.b.iii Mark 4:35-5:43 - Nature miracle, exorcism, and healing

Jesus continues to demonstrate his authority over laws of nature, the demonic world, and sickness.

#### II.b.iii.1 Mark 4:35-41 - Jesus Calms the Storm

While sailing across the lake toward the region of the Gerasenes, the group encountered a violent storm that even had experienced fishermen fearing for their lives, who instinctively turned to Jesus, who was sleeping. He calmed the storm and then rebuked his disciples for their own lack of faith. The account given here is fuller and more detailed than that in Matthew 8:23-27.

<sup>35</sup> That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, “Let us go over to the other side.” <sup>36</sup> Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him.

## Mark 4:36

That day when evening came. Jesus was not content just to work during the daytime but also used the evening to travel to his next venue. Although he did find time for a short sleep.

Go over to the other side. Jesus and his disciples were leaving the mainly Jewish region of Galilee to cross over the lake to the region of the Gerasenes. This was a mainly Gentile area, but as will be seen in Chapter Five, Jesus had a single purpose for this arduous voyage.

Just as he was. There was no time to collect food or extra clothing, even though a sea crossing at night would be cold. Jesus had a schedule to keep to.

Other boats with him. Jesus, no doubt, was in a boat owned by one of his disciples, and he had so many other



**A Galilæan Fishing Boat**

disciples that they now had to travel in several fishing boats similar to the one in the image. There is no mention of any crowd having travelled with him in Chapter Five and indeed it states here that he left the crowd behind.

<sup>37</sup> A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped.

#### Mark 4:37

A furious squall came up. The Sea of Galilee is 696 feet or 212m below sea level, and is prone to violent downdrafts and sudden storms. The fishermen among them would have been used to such storms, although it was not uncommon for some to lose their lives in the worst of storms. This seemed to be one such storm that threatened their lives.

Waves broke over the boat it was nearly swamped. At least one commentator attributes this storm to the Devil as an attempt to stop Jesus from achieving his forthcoming mission, or even an attempt to kill him to prevent him from getting to the Cross, but there is no biblical evidence to support this claim.

<sup>38</sup> Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, “Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?”

#### Mark 4:38

Sleeping on a cushion is an eyewitness detail included only in Mark, no doubt conveyed to him personally by Peter. It has been said throughout history that whenever the church is in turmoil it seems as if Christ is asleep, as it seemed for the Jewish church for so many years as well, when God gave them no word for public proclamation. The prophet writes: *<<Truly you are a God who has been hiding himself, the God and Saviour of Israel>>* (Isaiah 45:15), although the reality: *<<He will not let your foot slip – he who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep>>* (Psalm 121:3-4), no doubt Jesus could claim: *<<I slept but my heart was awake>>* (Song 5:2a). It should also be noted that everything is done in God’s way and in his timing: *<<For the revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay>>* (Habakkuk 2:3).

That Jesus was sleeping indicates his lack of fear and also great fatigue, a reminder of his true and complete humanity. There are possible echoes of Jonah here: *<<Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship. But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. The captain went to him and said, “How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us so that we will not perish”>>* (Jonah 1:4-6). However, there was a key difference. Jonah was fleeing from God’s service, while Jesus was and is still restoring people to God, fully engaged in his service. The disciples’ fear of perishing was greater than their confidence in the presence of Jesus.

The disciples woke him, perhaps in error for it could be said: <<*Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires*>> (Song 2:7b), <<*because God is love*>> (1 John 4:8b), especially not to accuse him as they did here - don't you care if we drown? This may seem like an inappropriate way to speak to their master, although they were not the only ones to do so, as can be seen when he was staying in the house of Mary and Martha: <<*But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"*>> (Luke 10:40).

Of course, Jesus does care, for they were his spiritual children and he has said: <<*In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish*>> (Matthew 18:14). He then thanks his Father that: <<*"I have not lost one of those you gave me"*>> (John 18:9b). Although he had hoped they would have had the faith to see the storm through without him. That is how it is with the church in the modern age. There are times when Jesus knows he has equipped the church adequately, something he has always done: <<*Then Jesus asked them, "When I sent you without purse, bag or sandals, did you lack anything?" "Nothing," they answered*>> (Luke 22:35). However, it still seems that there are times when the church does not seem to act without seeking further guidance from him, or calls upon him to still the storm, instead of steering into it to come out the other side, perhaps battered and bruised, but stronger for the experience. All the church, and indeed its individuals, need to remember is to cry out: <<*We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you*>> (2 Chronicles 20:12b). Such is the purpose of trials and tests.

<sup>39</sup> He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.

#### Mark 4:39

Quiet! Be still! where Peace! Be still! is used in several other translations. The Greek *siopa* comes from the term to be silent, therefore quiet is probably the better translation, although either term gives the same image of serenity following this apparently simplistic command to perform yet another astonishing miracle. Jesus displayed his divine power over nature, as he had over diseases and the spiritual realm.

The wind died down and it was completely calm. The psalmist had perhaps been given a vision of just such an incident as this: <<*For he spoke and stirred up a tempest that lifted high the waves. They mounted up to the heavens and went down to the depths; in their peril their courage melted away. They reeled and staggered like drunkards; they were at their wits' end. Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble, and he brought them out of their distress. He stilled the storm to a whisper; the waves of the sea were hushed. They were glad when it grew calm, and he guided them to their desired haven*>> (Psalm 107:25-30). In the OT, God demonstrated his control over nature: <<*If he holds back the waters, there is drought; if he lets them loose, they devastate the land*>> (Job 12:15), <<*When he established the force of the wind and measured out the waters*>> (Job 28:25), and the prophet identified him as the Creator:

<<He who forms the mountains, who creates the wind, and who reveals his thoughts to mankind, who turns dawn to darkness, and treads on the heights of the earth – the Lord God Almighty is his name>> (Amos 4:13).

<sup>40</sup> He said to his disciples, “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?”

#### Mark 4:40

Why are you so afraid? Jesus rebuked the disciples for being afraid, for the antidote to fear is faith, i.e. trust in Jesus. They were right in turning to Jesus, but they were reprimanded regarding their fear and feeling of being forsaken by God, or at least their lack of trust in him when things got tough.

<sup>41</sup> They were terrified and asked each other, “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!”

#### Mark 4:41

They were terrified. Their fear now turned to the realisation that their Rabbi is more than they at first supposed him to be. Healing miracles were one thing; controlling nature itself, that was something beyond human experience or comprehension.

Who is this? The disciples asked the right question, for the calming of the storm gave evidence that this man is also truly God. They had come to him with the cries that: <<*The seas have lifted up, Lord, the seas have lifted up their voice; the seas have lifted up their pounding waves. Mightier than the thunder of the great waters, mightier than the breakers of the sea – the Lord on high is mighty*>> (Psalm 93:3-4), only to fear him, but also to marvel at the one: <<*who stilled the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, and the turmoil of the nations*>> (Psalm 65:7). The answer to this question is, of course, their God and Saviour, something they would eventually come to realise in part before his death: <<*“But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” Peter answered, “You are the Messiah”*>> (Mark 8:29).