

# THE PARABLE OF THE MUSTARD SEED: THE GROWTH OF GOD'S KINGDOM MARK 04:30–32

## *Introduction: Christianity and the Church*

Jesus is describing the growth and greatness of His kingdom, that is, of Christianity. He shows how Christianity begins as the smallest of seeds and grows into the greatest of movements.

The message of the parable is a powerful message to individual believers and congregations as well as to the worldwide church. The seed of faith begins ever so small, but it grows into the greatest of bushes as it nourishes itself day by day. Mature (grown, v. 32) believers and congregations alike provide shelter for the people of a turbulent world.

- I. The parable describes the kingdom (Christianity) (v. 30).
- II. A seed is sown (v. 31).
- III. The seed does grow (v. 32).
- IV. The birds do nest under its shade (v. 32).

### MARK 04:30–32 CHRISTIANITY AND THE CHURCH

There are two interpretations of this parable.

1. Some say the birds are those in the world who find their shelter in the kingdom (the church, Christianity). The kingdom had a small beginning, but it is now growing into a stately movement. Many in the world, believers and non-believers alike, have found help and safety under its branches. Laws and institutions of mercy, justice, and honour have to a large extent evolved from this magnificent movement. This interpretation relies heavily upon the picture painted by the Old Testament. A great empire is said to be like a tree, and conquered nations are said to be like birds who perch under its shade (Eze. 17:22-24; 31:1-6; Dan. 4:14).
2. Others say the birds are the children of the evil one (Satan) who see the protective covering of the kingdom and seek shelter therein.

Neither interpretation need exhaust the meaning. However, two facts should be noted.

1. Jesus was speaking to the crowds in the first four parables. His purpose was to teach what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. It is a mixture of good and evil. He had just been vindicating His Messiahship to the Pharisees, who were set upon destroying Him (Mt. 12:1-50; 12:14). It was the same day that He began to speak in parables. His purpose was to hide the mysteries from unbelievers and to protect Himself from those who would destroy Him (Mt. 12:10-17). They were the evil ones who had penetrated the kingdom. However, this needed to be known only by the true disciple, not necessarily by those who were evil.
2. The birds are used to describe the evil one in the Parable of the Seed. □

## I. *Mark 04:30 Kingdom of Heaven*

Jesus described the Kingdom of Heaven, that is, the kingdom's present state on earth. He revealed how the kingdom, Christianity, was to begin as the smallest movement and grow into the greatest movement.

## II. *Mark 04:31 The Gospel is Sown*

The seed is sown. The words "in the ground" are significant. The ground or the world is where the seed is sown. It is the ground, the world, that needs the seed, that is, the gospel of God. And God has ordained the good news of His love to be sown "in the ground." (See *Good News*, 1 Cor. 15:1-11; See Jn. 3:16; 1 Jn. 2:1-2.)

Christianity: a mustard seed was planted. The mustard seed was used in proverbial sayings to describe smallness in the day of Jesus. The mustard seed grew to be a great bush, a bush as large as a tree. Its characteristics were loftiness, expansion and prominence (See *Mustard Seed*, Mk. 4:31).

*The Man* is Jesus Christ. The field is the world. Jesus Christ plants the seed in His field which is the world. Note the world is His (Mt. 13:31).

Took (labon) means to deliberately take; to take with purpose and thought. The planting of the seed was not by chance. It did not just happen. Christ *deliberately* planted the seed and nourished the growth of the bush. The bush existed because of great *purpose and thought*.

The *field* means the world. As said, Christ plants the seed in His field. The world is His.

**Thought 1.** The Man is active, very active, not lazy or lethargic. He plans and He sows. This is a great lesson as we plant the mustard seed of our lives. What an enormous difference there would be in the world if we would plant our lives where many could come and find the care they so desperately need!

**John 3:16** "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

**1 John 1:1-2** *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched — this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us.*

**Rom 10:12** *For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile — the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him.*

**1 Tim 2:4** *Who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.*

**Thought 2.** The farmer has to have a commitment of heart, mind, and body to sow the seed. All three are essential. Without any one of the commitments, the sowing does not get done or else it is done haphazardly. He must have...

- commitment of heart for motivation
- commitment of mind for planning
- commitment of body for planting

**Mark 12:30** *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.*

**John 4:34-35** *“My food,” said Jesus, “is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work. Do you not say, ‘Four months more and then the harvest’? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest.”*

**John 9:4** *“As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work.”*

**Rom 12:1-2** *Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God — this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

**Rom 13:12** *The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light.*

**2 Tim 4:2** *Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage — with great patience and careful instruction.*

**Thought 3.** The ground is fruitless, sterile, empty, barren without the mustard seed of God. The ground becomes a wasteland; it ends without the mustard seed of God.

**Job 38:25-27** *Who cuts a channel for the torrents of rain, and a path for the thunderstorm, to water a land where no man lives, a desert with no one in it, to satisfy a desolate wasteland and make it sprout with grass?*

The fact that the mustard seed is the smallest of seeds is also significant (See *Mustard Seed*, Mk. 4:31). Just because a seed is small does not discourage or keep the farmer from sowing. He knows the enormous potential of the seed for growth and fruitfulness, so he plants. Note that the power for reproduction and bearing fruit is in the seed, not in the farmer. All the farmer has to do is sow the seed. But again, someone has to sow the seed if there is to be fruit.

**Thought 1.** What a lesson for believers and churches! The seed of the gospel, though ever so small, is enormously powerful.

=> No matter how insignificant or small we may feel in reaching others, we need to sow the gospel.

=> No matter how insignificant or small we may feel our church witness is, we need to sow the gospel.

**Psa 126:5-6** *Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy. He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him.*

**Hosea 10:12** Sow for yourselves righteousness, reap the fruit of unfailing love, and break up your unploughed ground; for it is time to seek the Lord, until he comes and showers righteousness on you.

**Gal 6:8** The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.

**Mark 16:15** He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation."

**John 20:21** Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."

### 1 CORINTHIANS 15:01–11 GOOD NEWS, GOSPEL

Gospel means "Good News." There is only one gospel, but it is described in different ways. It is called the "Good News of the Kingdom and the Good News of God" (Mt. 4:23; Mk. 1:14); the "Gospel of God's Grace" (Acts 20:24); the "Gospel of God" (Rom. 1:1); the "Gospel of Christ" (Mk. 1:1; Rom. 1:16; 2 Cor. 4:4; 10:14); the "glorious Gospel" (2 Cor. 4:4; 1 Tim. 1:11); and the "Eternal Gospel" (Rev. 14:6). □

### MARK 04:31 MUSTARD SEED

Mustard seed was not actually the smallest seed known in Jesus' day. But the seed was small, and the mustard bush grew as large as some trees. It has been reported that a rider on horseback could find shade under its branches. The fact that such a small seed could produce such a huge bush caused people to use the mustard seed as a proverbial saying to describe smallness. □

### III. **Mark 04:32 Christianity and the Church**

The seed does grow. Note the words "when planted." Again, the critical point is this: the seed has to be sown. Someone has to sow the seed if the church (Christianity) is to continue to grow. *Growth follows sowing. If there is no sowing, there is no growth. This is the law of reproduction, of fruit bearing.* The seed grows "when it is planted."

The result of sowing is growth. In dealing with Christianity and the church, the result of sowing is to see the greatest of movements. The bush (Christianity) grew into the greatest of bushes. Christ said explicitly that when the kingdom or Christianity is fully grown, it is the greatest of movements.

1. Christianity is the greatest movement socially. It has changed the face of the earth. Liberty and freedom, and the laws and institutions of mercy, justice, and honour have for the most part evolved from Christianity. The movement has set free the enslaved and raised enormously the status of women and children (Acts 16:14).

2. Christianity is the greatest movement individually and personally. This is true because Christ did for an individual just what a tree does for a bird.
  - 1) Christ gives *rest* to a person just as a tree provides rest for a bird (Mt. 11:28-30; Heb. 4:1-13).
  - 2) Christ gives a *home* to a person just as a tree provides a home for a bird (Mt. 12:48-50).
  - 3) Christ gives *food*, physically and spiritually, to a person just as a tree provides food for a bird (Mt. 6:25-34).

**Thought 1.** This parable is a great encouragement to every believer.

- 1) It is an encouragement to us in our personal lives and in our ministry. No matter how small we may begin, we must continue on. If we continue, our lives and efforts will grow. We may be like Christ and see little growth in numbers while here on earth, but the growth will take place. Success is assured.

**John 4:35-36** *“Do you not say, ‘Four months more and then the harvest’? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. Even now the reaper draws his wages, even now he harvests the crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together.”*

**Psa 126:5-6** *Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy. He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him.*

- 2) It is an encouragement to our hope in eternity. The Kingdom will finally come some day, and we shall be rewarded for our faithful labour.

**Mat 10:42** *“And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward.”*

**Mat 25:23** *His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’*

**Mat 25:34-36** *“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’”*

**1 Cor 15:58** *Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.*

**Thought 2.** The growth of a tree from a small seed is nothing compared to the growth of a person who truly comes to know Christ nor to the growth of a church that is truly committed to the mission of Christ (Jn. 12:24).



**Acts 13:48** *When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honoured the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.*

**Acts 28:28** *“Therefore I want you to know that God’s salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!”*

**Rom 15:9** *So that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy, as it is written: “Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing hymns to your name.”*

**Gal 3:14** *He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.*

**Eph 3:6** *This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.*

**Psa 72:16** *Let grain abound throughout the land; on the tops of the hills may it sway. Let its fruit flourish like Lebanon; let it thrive like the grass of the field.*

**Isa 9:7** *Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.*

**Isa 54:3** *For you will spread out to the right and to the left; your descendants will dispossess nations and settle in their desolate cities.*

**Isa 55:5** *“Surely you will summon nations you know not, and nations that do not know you will hasten to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has endowed you with splendour.”*

**Isa 60:5** *Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy; the wealth on the seas will be brought to you, to you the riches of the nations will come.*

**Isa 60:22** *The least of you will become a thousand, the smallest a mighty nation. I am the Lord; in its time I will do this swiftly.*

#### **IV. Mark 04:32 Christianity and the Church**

The birds do nest under its shade. Many commentators make this point: birds feast on the seeds of the mustard bush. The very fact that the bush (the church) is present with *so much good* to be feasted upon means that many will come to its shade. ■