

Mark 4:30-33 The Parable of the Mustard Seed

Jesus is telling us that He's going to give us a picture of the Kingdom of God in a parable. For believers, parables are a means of imparting the "mysteries of the kingdom of heaven" to those who are spiritually awake and willing to understand. An earthly story with a heavenly meaning. For those who have the humility to come to Jesus and understand, parables convey truths about God's character, the nature of His Kingdom, and human responsibility.

31 It is like a mustard seed,--In this parable, Jesus predicts the amazing growth of the kingdom of heaven. Now, if a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning, that is revealed to those who hear the voice of our Master, then in order to understand it, we must first comprehend the earthly part of the parable, in this case a mustard seed.

when sown upon the soil, though it is the smallest of all the seeds that are upon the soil,--

The mustard seed in question, likely black mustard (*Brassica nigra*), usually about 1 mm in diameter, was known in Jewish culture as a symbol of smallness, even before Jesus' earthly ministry. It is certainly the smallest seed likely to be sown in a Jewish herb garden or agricultural field of those days. Jesus is not trying to make a generalized botanical statement about all seeds in creation, just giving an example that they were familiar with. The point of the Parable of the Mustard Seed is that something big and blessed—the kingdom of God—had humble beginnings. How significant could the short ministry of Christ be? He had but a handful of followers, He was a man of no rank and without means, and He lived in what everyone considered a backwater region of the world. The life and death of Christ did not catch the world's attention any more than a mustard seed would lying on the ground by the road. But this was a work of God. What seemed inconsequential at first grew into a movement of worldwide influence.

God reminds us that He can grow humble starts into great outcomes. Zech 4:10 **"Do not despise these small beginnings, for the Lord rejoices to see the work begin."** This verse reminds us that God values the initial steps we take, no matter how modest they seem, and can use them to do amazing things. God reminds Job of this in 8:7 **"Though your beginning was small, your latter days will be very great."** God delights in showing His power to make the small great. What was God's criteria in choosing Israel? That they were a great nation He was going to make greater? No. Deuteronomy 7:7-8 **7 "The Lord did not make you His beloved nor choose you because you were greater in number than any of the peoples, since you were the fewest of all peoples, 8 but because the Lord loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers, the Lord brought you out by a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of [m]slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Israel was the smallest of peoples. One man. Abraham. Like Israel, the Kingdom of God starts from the smallest of beginnings—one man—Jesus, who, after His ascension, gives the work to 12 Apostles, who along with other disciples, form the beginning off the Church. The growth of the Church is the Work of God, and has to proceed as God wills it. John 1:12 12 But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name, 13 who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of a man, but of God.**

32 yet when it is sown, it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants, and forms large branches, --The black mustard seed grows into a large shrub, typically 4-6 feet, 6-8 feet in good soil and water conditions, and up to ten or twelve feet for the largest examples. Importantly, in wild, or uncultivated conditions, it may often stay close to 2-3 feet. Although it is a tall plant, it develops a single, erect central stalk that branches in the upper part, producing yellow flowers, and long, beaked seed pods. It's energy is focused on vertical growth for seed production, so it has a narrow lateral spread, compared to leafy greens, usually only 1-2 feet wide. So, it is a tall, slender plant. The growth of the Church after it's birth on Pentecost was clearly described as the work of God. He was causing the growth. The Apostles were doing what they should, according to the

example that Jesus had set, but it was God who was adding to their number all who were being saved. Look at the description in Acts 2:41–47 **41 So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls. 42 They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. 44 And all the believers were together and had all things in common; 45 and they would sell their property and possessions and share them with all, to the extent that anyone had need. 46 Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.** When the gospel began spreading across the Roman Empire, it didn’t come with military might, political clout, or institutional support. It came through fishermen, slaves, mothers, merchants, and martyrs—ordinary people who lived with such conviction that the world couldn’t ignore them. In Acts 17:6, the accusation was made: **“These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also...”** This was AD 49 during Paul’s second missionary journey, and already the effect of the gospel on the world was being noted. This was not an exaggeration. The Kingdom of God was turning everything upside down—starting with the hearts of those who refused to live by the world’s values. And nowhere was this more evident than in the early Church.

This growth happened slowly at first. According to Robert Louis Wilken, emeritus professor of history at the University of Virginia (in *The First Thousand Years: A Global History of Christianity*): At the end of the first century there were fewer than ten thousand Christians in the Roman Empire. The population at the time numbered some sixty million, which meant that Christians made up one hundredth of one percent or 0.017 percent according to the figures of a contemporary sociologist. By the year 200, the number may have increased to a little more than two hundred thousand, still a tiny minority, under one percent (0.36). By the year 250, however, the number had risen to more than a million, almost two percent of the population. By the year 300 Christians made up 10 percent of the population, approximately 6 million. This growth happened slowly at first, but over the centuries blossomed into millions—just like the black mustard plant’s linear stock that after a while blossoms into mustard flowers.

Within just a few decades after Jesus’ resurrection, the early Church transformed the Roman Empire — and the world — in ways that defied the expectations of the time. Starting with about 120 believers in Jerusalem, the movement spread rapidly across the Mediterranean, multiplying into a vast network of churches within a few generations. How did God do this through them?

1. No Platforms, Just Obedience--The early Christians had no buildings, no mass media, and no political backing. Yet they preached Christ wherever they went — in homes, streets, and prisons — not as a program, but as a way of life. Every believer saw themselves as a vessel of the Kingdom, living out the gospel through love, generosity, and forgiveness.
2. Radical Love and Sacrifice--Their growth was fueled by love that extended to enemies, the poor, and the marginalized. They cared for abandoned children, served the sick during plagues, and forgave persecutors. This love had no worldly explanation, making it compelling and transformative.
3. Refusal to Compromise--They refused to adapt the gospel to gain favor with the world. Living holy lives separate from corrupt systems, they embraced the cost of faithfulness — losing jobs, status, property, or even their lives — because they trusted in eternal hope.
4. Discipleship Over Conversion--The goal was not just to win arguments or gain numbers, but to raise up citizens of the Kingdom who would live and die for Christ. Discipleship happened in homes, prisons, and at gravesides, making the movement deeply personal and sacrificial.

5. Networked Multiplication--The early Church grew through intentional networks — the Jerusalem Council, letters to churches, and coordinated giving. This “Antioch Tradition” created a complex, interconnected system that multiplied churches across the Roman Empire in just three centuries.

6. Supernatural and Spiritual Power--Apostles like Peter and Paul performed miracles, cast out demons, and experienced angelic intervention. Their boldness, prayer life, and obedience to the Holy Spirit enabled them to spread the gospel with authority and impact.

and forms large branches, with the result that the birds of the sky can nest under its shade

There are both good sides and bad sides to the tremendous growth of the church. Clearly, we want as many people saved as possible, since 2 Peter 3:9 **God is The Lord is not slow about His**

promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not willing for any to perish, but for all to come to repentance . In Jeremiah and elsewhere, God pleads with Israel to repent, and

turn back to Him saying **turn, turn, why would you perish?** But, we also have to recognize that the parables of the Kingdom of God that Jesus taught do not paint the earthly manifestations of the Kingdom as perfect. In the parable of the Tares, also called Weeds among Wheat, in Matthew

13:24-30 Jesus presented another parable to them, saying, **“The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. 25 But while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and left. 26 And when the wheat sprouted and produced grain, then the weeds also became evident. 27 And the slaves of the landowner came and said to him, ‘Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?’ 28 And he said to them, ‘An enemy has done this!’ The slaves said to him, ‘Do you want us, then, to go and gather them up?’ 29 But he said, ‘No; while you are gathering up the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. 30 Allow both to grow together until the harvest; and at the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, “First gather up the weeds and bind them in bundles to burn them; but gather the wheat into my barn.””**”

This parable, illustrates that the Kingdom of God on earth will be a bit of a mixed multitude, some believers, and some unbelievers who just come along for the ride, and even some who’s purpose is to disrupt and poison the work that God is trying to do. This lets us know that it is the quality of the tree that matters. We see this again in the parable of the unfruitful tree in Luke 13:6-9. God is patient, but He expects believers to bear spiritual fruit. **“A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, ‘Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?’ And he answered him, ‘Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”**”

This parable emphasizes God's mercy and patience. The vineyard owner represents God, who expects His people to produce good fruit (spiritual results) in their lives. The vinedresser symbolizes Jesus, who intercedes for humanity, asking for more time and care to help them grow. It is a call to Repentance: The three years mentioned in the parable signify the time during which Jesus and John the Baptist preached repentance, and the time given to repent in our own lives. The lack of fruit represents the unrepentant hearts of the people. The parable serves as a warning that continued unfruitfulness will lead to judgment. While God offers opportunities for repentance and growth, there is an expectation for believers to respond by producing spiritual fruit. The act of cutting down the tree symbolizes the judgment that awaits those who remain unproductive despite God's grace and care. So we each have to ask ourselves, “are we bearing fruit in accordance with our faith. Are we taking advantage of the opportunities for repentance and renewal that God provides?”