

The Parable of the Mustard Seed -- Mark 4:30-34

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Please bow your heads with me for prayer. (Pray) Today we are continuing our journey through the book of Mark. We will be considering the last parable recorded by Mark in what is known as the Sermon by the Sea. My children and I enjoy going to the city parks here in Lancaster. Mary Burnham Lancaster Park is one we have visited on occasion. Elijah and Abigail enjoy going down the slide and swinging on the swings. There are a few large oak trees there. Yesterday as we were leaving the park, at the base of one of these trees we noticed all these acorns lying on the ground. It is amazing to think that given the chance these could grow into a 70 foot oak tree. The parable Jesus shares in our Scripture today pictures the growth of the mustard seed.

Let's begin by considering the parable itself:

A mustard seed was sown on the ground. While being smaller than any of the other cultivated seeds, it grew larger than any of the other cultivated plants. The branches of the mustard plant were so large that the birds nested in their shade.

We will consider two questions as we look at this parable. First of all, "What did this story mean to the Jews?" The plant Jesus mentions was most likely the black mustard plant. It often grew wild in the fields in the area where Jesus was and it is likely that as Jesus told this parable, mustard plants could be seen growing wild in the fields. This plant was also cultivated for its seeds which were used as a condiment or spice. Of all the seeds that were cultivated by the Jews, the mustard seed was the smallest. It became a general term used to describe something very small. Often when we are looking down at cars from a tall building we say that the cars look like ants. We simply mean that they are really small. In Jesus' day they might have looked down from a mountain and described the sheep dotting the landscape as mustard seeds, meaning the sheep looked really small. It is not known for certain how large the mustard plants grew in Palestine at this time. Some say they would have been only one to three feet tall. Others claim they would have been anywhere between four and twelve feet tall with branches up to 1" or more thick.

The Jews would have been familiar with similar analogies from the writings in the Old Testament, which describe something very small growing to be very large. I invite you to turn with me to Daniel 2:34, 35. The Jews had been taken captive to Babylon. They were no longer in the land of Canaan, which God had given to them. They were ruled by a king whose name was Nebuchadnezzar. One night he had a vision or a dream. He saw a great image made of different metals. It was a statue of a person. In Daniel chapter 2 the prophet Daniel describes this statue. Notice now what Daniel portrays in verses 34 and 35. (Read) A stone appeared. Compared to the "great image" (verse 31) this stone was very small. It recalls the story of David and Goliath, in which David used a small stone to knock out a great giant. The stone that Daniel describes became a "great mountain that filled the whole earth". According to Daniel 2:44, this great mountain represents God's future kingdom which will be established here on earth after Jesus' Second Coming. So, when Jesus mentions the parable of the mustard seed, perhaps some of the Jews recalled this story.

They may have also recalled their own history as a nation. Turn with me to Deuteronomy 7:6, 7. Moses is in the midst of a long discourse. He is speaking to Israel on the banks of the Jordan River. The Israelites are about to go in and possess the land of Canaan. Moses will not be allowed to go. He will die on this side of the Jordan River. So this is his final address to the Israelites before they cross over. Notice how he describes the Israelites in verses 6 and 7. (Read) When God chose the Israelites to be His own special people, they were the

"least of all peoples". But God had chosen them in order to make them "a special treasure above all peoples on the face of the earth". This was literally fulfilled in the days of King Solomon. In 1 Kings 10:23 it says, "King Solomon surpassed all the kings of the earth in riches and wisdom." So, when Jesus told the parable of the mustard seed, perhaps some of the Jews recalled their own history as a nation. They most likely would have understood that Jesus was referring to His kingdom in this parable.

And now our second question concerning this parable: "What was Jesus calling attention to?" He is calling attention to the growth of God's kingdom. Jesus had come to establish a kingdom in people's hearts. And He is explaining how this kingdom would become the great kingdom of God. There were some misconceptions in the minds of some of those who were in the crowd listening to Jesus. They couldn't believe that Jesus had truly come to establish God's kingdom. Turn with me to John 7:48. The Pharisees and chief priests have sent officers to arrest Jesus. These officers return empty handed and instead express their admiration for Jesus' teaching. The Pharisees are furious and claim that they have been deceived. Notice what they say in verse 48. (Read) The evidence they give to show that Jesus is a nobody at best and more likely a lunatic is that none of the church leaders were believers in Him. They saw nothing more than a non-educated rabbi with only 12 followers who were without jobs. In essence they were telling these officers, "This guy's radical party will never get off the ground." So, with this perception among the church leaders, Jesus defended the validity of "the kingdom of God" He had been announcing.

In the parable of the mustard seed Jesus was calling attention to the growth of God's kingdom. He declared that His small group was the beginnings of something much bigger. Turn with me to Mark 3:13-15. Jesus is just beginning to organize the first residents in His kingdom. (Read) Mark introduces here a small, but intentional beginning. As the mustard seed in the parable was not a wild seed, but was sown in order to be cultivated, so Jesus introduces the beginning of His kingdom with intentionality and purpose. Now turn with me to Acts 4:13. Peter and John have made a bold and convincing defense before the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court of the Jewish nation. And notice how the Jews in the Sanhedrin respond. (Read) Jesus has reproduced Himself in His apostles. He is building His kingdom on the principle of multiplication. Let's say someone decides today to plant a church. They have a building but no people. So they decide to begin by bringing one person to church next week. Each week thereafter everyone brings one person with them to church. In about 4 months the whole city of Lancaster would be a part of the church. That is assuming the most recent population figures for Lancaster at 35,000. Now imagine this. In about 7 months the whole world would be a part of the church. That is assuming the most recent population figures for the world at 7 billion. This is the principle Jesus has chosen to grow His kingdom. The kingdom He came to establish was to be built up in people's hearts. So, the size of His kingdom would depend on how many people responded to His teaching and followed Him. Turn with me to Revelation 7:9 as we consider the growth of God's kingdom. The apostle John is on the island of Patmos. He is seeing a vision of heaven in the future. (Read) God's kingdom is no longer only 12 men who are without jobs. His kingdom has grown into a "great multitude which no one could number". The mustard seed has grown into a large plant, whose branches are large enough to allow the birds to nest in their shade.

You may be discouraged today by your smallness. Your daily life as a Christian may seem insignificant in comparison to your own faults and the great needs and evil in the world. But you are not who you will be. You may see yourself as nothing more than a sinner with a lot of problems. But that's not what God sees. I invite you to turn with me to Revelation 5:9, 10 for our closing text. This is a song sung by the saints in heaven. (Read). We are not who we will be. One day we will reign as kings and priests on this earth. As I have considered the message in this parable, I have been convicted that I spend too much time thinking about who I am now and not enough time thinking about who I will be. According to Revelation 3:21 one day I will sit

with Jesus Christ on His throne as a king. I am not just a sinner saved by grace. I am a child of God, a citizen in His kingdom, who will one day reign as a king with Jesus Christ Himself.