

Parable of the Growing Seed - Mark 4:26-29

by Travis Dean
August 21, 2010

Today we will continue our journey through the book of Mark. Before we do, though, I invite you to bow your heads with me for prayer. We are in the middle of a series of parables. Jesus has been giving what is known as the Sermon by the Sea. So far, we have covered four parables in parts 1 & 2. Part 1 was the parable of the sower. Part 2 consisted of three brief parables given in quick succession. Today's parable is part 3 and next week we will conclude with part 4.

I enjoy watching things grow. Don't you? Maybe you enjoy watching things grow in your garden. Others of us may enjoy watching our children or grandchildren grow. When I worked as a carpenter, I found a lot of enjoyment out of watching a house grow. First, we framed the floor. Then, we stood up the walls. Next came the ceiling joist, which were followed by the rafters (for a one-story house). The first day we arrived there was nothing more than a foundation (some houses had basement concrete walls in place). A few weeks later, when we were finished, the entire frame of the house was standing tall. Seeing this growth take place was rewarding

The parable Jesus relates in our Scripture today focuses in on the growth of seed. As we consider this parable, let's begin with a look at the story itself:

A man threw some seed on the ground. While he went about his daily routine, the seed germinated and eventually grew into a mature plant. When the grain was fully ripe, the man used his sickle to harvest the grain.

Our first question to consider regarding this parable is, "What did this story mean to the Jews?" As we have already considered in previous stories in Mark, the Jewish culture was a part of an agricultural society. What Jesus describes in today's story was a common scene to the Jews. As people walked the paths of Palestine, they could observe the growth of seeds in the fields. Barley and wheat were common crops grown at this time. As I have the opportunity to drive the "paths" of Ohio, I have enjoyed watching the corn and soybeans grow. It's always good to see fields full of good healthy plants, because those crops may end up on your table some day, or at least will affect the availability and cost of the food you do put on your table.

The growth of seed was not only a familiar sight in daily life for the Jews, but it was also often used in the teaching of the prophets in the Old Testament. I invite you to turn with me Hosea 14:4, 5. These are the words of the Lord through the prophet Hosea. (Read) The Lord promises to heal and show His love to Israel. He describes these blessings as being like the morning dew that freshens the crops in the fields. The prosperity that His blessings would bring to Israel are then compared to the growth of a lily and the spreading of the roots of a tree in Lebanon. (Lebanon was a region in Palestine where majestic cedars grew) This comparison of God's blessings to the growth of vegetation is often repeated throughout the Old Testament. So, it is likely that the Jews who first heard Jesus tell this parable of the growing seed pictured a time of prosperity. The blessing of God was brought to their minds.

Jesus mentions in Mark 4:29 that the growth of this seed culminates in a harvest. The Jewish society was centered around harvest time. Turn with me to Psalm 126:5, 6. This Psalm is reflecting on the joy the Israelites felt when they were able to return to their own land after being captives in Babylon for 70 years.

(Read) The psalmist says that the joy they felt to be home again was like the joy experienced during the harvest. Bringing bundles of grain home from the fields was a time of rejoicing.

The time of harvest was so central to the Jewish culture that they used it as a way of telling time. 2 Samuel 21:9 is an example of this. David made an agreement with the Gibeonites. And the time of this event is described as taking place "in the days of harvest, in the first days, in the beginning of the barley harvest."

We will consider one more example as to how central harvest time was to the Jewish people. Turn with me to Exodus 23:14-17. (Read) There were three feasts (or festivals) that were at the core of the Jewish culture. No male was allowed to miss any of these feasts in Jerusalem. It might be like going to church in our culture on Christmas and Easter. You might not be a very devout person, but you would at least show up for these services. Each of these three core feasts were established around harvest time. The first major feast was the Passover or Feast of Unleavened Bread. This festival took place at the beginning of barley harvest. When the barley in the fields was ripe and ready for harvest, this all-important feast began. The second central feast was the Feast of Harvest. In Leviticus 23 it is referred to as the Feast of Weeks. And in Acts chapter 2 it is mentioned as Pentecost. This festival took place at the end of barley harvest. When the last of the barley had been harvested, the second great feast commenced. The third major feast of the Jews was the Feast of Ingathering, also known as the Feast of Tabernacles. This took place at the end of the autumn harvest. When the fall crops were ready for harvest, this great festival began.

Jesus refers to this great anticipation of harvest in His parable. In Mark 4:29 He says the man who scattered the seed IMMEDIATELY put in his sickle for the harvest. He had been anticipating this moment ever since he had put the seed in the ground. And with excitement he harvests the ripe grain.

So, when Jesus gave this parable, what was He calling attention to? What idea was He trying to get the people to understand by telling this story? First, in Mark 4:26 Jesus began by saying, "The kingdom of God is as if...." He told this parable to teach something about the kingdom of God. At different times we have looked at what kind of kingdom Jesus came to establish. But for review I invite you to turn with me to Mark 1:14, 15. Jesus was just beginning His ministry in Galilee. And notice what His message was. (Read) He came preaching the good news about the kingdom of God. What was the good news? It was very near. What did He tell people to do to get ready for the setting up of this kingdom? "Repent, and believe in the gospel." Repentance and believing are matters of the heart. The kingdom of God that Jesus came to establish was going to be set up in people's hearts. This is the kingdom that He was illustrating and calling attention to by telling this parable.

The idea concerning the kingdom of God that Jesus was focusing in on is the work of the Spirit in the heart. The focus has shifted from how the people were responding to what the Holy Spirit was doing. Notice in Mark 4:27 that the means of the seeds' growth was not known by the man who threw out the seed. He observed the growth but he didn't know HOW it grew. Jesus' focus in telling this story is on the mysterious means of the seeds' growth. Then in Mark 4:28 notice how Jesus says that the earth yields a crop all by itself or, in other words, spontaneously. There is a power producing growth that is independent from the man who threw out the seed. Also notice how Jesus focuses on the stages of growth in verse 28: "first the blade (leaf), then the head (of grain), after that the full (mature) grain in the head." In each stage of the seeds' growth there is a mysterious, independent power at work.

Turn with me to John 3:8. Jesus is speaking with Nicodemus, a Pharisee. He is explaining the new birth of the Christian, which could be symbolized by the germination of seed. (Read) Jesus compares the work of the Holy Spirit to the wind. The wind is in some ways a mysterious force. You can't see it. You can only see what it

does. The work of the Spirit is similarly mysterious or hidden. And Jesus calls attention to it by referring to the mysterious or hidden power that is at work in the growth of seed.

Turn now to Zechariah 4:6. (Read) God accomplishes His work through the power of the Holy Spirit. Not with military might or strong men does He establish His kingdom. It's not visible. It's not glamorous or attention-getting. God's kingdom is established in people's hearts silently. To many His work is imperceptible.

Notice the climactic ending to the parable in Mark 4:29. The man returns to the field for what he has been waiting for. When the grain is ripe, he immediately puts in the sickle. Jesus identified an immediate response to the ripening of the grain. The word that is translated "puts in" actually means to "send out". Matthew 24:31 says that when Jesus comes again, He will send out His angels to gather His people from every corner of the globe. Just as the man "sent out" his sickle to harvest the grain, Jesus will send out His angels to gather His people. Indeed there is a great harvest is coming. Turn with me to Revelation 14:14-16 for our last text. The apostle John is in vision on the island of Patmos. Notice what he sees. (Read) John is given a glimpse into the future. He sees Jesus coming in the clouds of heaven. What does He have in His hand? A sickle. He is coming to gather in the great harvest of His people who are ripe and ready for harvest. The Holy Spirit has grown God's kingdom in people's hearts. God's people have reached a level of spiritual maturity to where they are ripe for harvest. This is the day that God the Father and Jesus His Son have been waiting for. Jesus came to this earth close to 2000 years ago in order to establish God's kingdom in people's hearts. He threw out some seed, and ever since then He has been waiting for the time when this seed will ripen. When that time finally comes, He will excitedly thrust in His sickle and reap the harvest. He will gather His people from the earth and take them with Him to heaven. What a day of rejoicing that will be! The joy experienced on that day will be far greater than any barley or wheat harvest. There will be far more rejoicing on that day than there was on any Passover or Feast of Tabernacles.

I mentioned at the beginning how I enjoyed watching houses grow. In a matter of weeks the frame of a house can be built from the ground up. But I have found that spiritual growth is not so quick. I have spent a lot of time frustrated with the lack of spiritual growth in my own life. The fruit of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5:22 always seemed so elusive. It is often debated whether any of us will ever become spiritually ripe on this earth. If I look to my past, I would have to say no. But if I look to God's Word, I would have to say yes. The whole reason Jesus came to this earth and sowed seed was so that it might ripen for a great harvest. As I pondered this during this past week, it made me want to become ripe for harvest. No, I'm not saved by becoming ripe. I am saved by Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection. But somehow knowing that Jesus is eagerly waiting for His grain to ripen makes me want to become ripe for harvest. I want the power of the Spirit that has made me born again to make me ready for harvest. Harvest time will eventually come. God's Word has foretold it. And the power of the Holy Spirit will accomplish it. I want to be one of those seeds that gets harvested. What about you?