

INTRODUCTION

How many of you were raised on a farm? Raise your hand. How many of you have parents or grandparents that were raised on a farm? Since we're becoming an urban and suburban culture, many of us have lost the appreciation for agriculture.

But when Jesus was teaching people 2,000 years ago, every listener was familiar with planting seeds and harvesting crops. They couldn't just run down to Brookshire's or Fresh and pick up food. They only ate what they could produce.

That's why so many of the parables of Jesus are about plants and seeds. When my daughter, Jenni was a young girl, we were eating a watermelon and really enjoying it. I held up one of the little black seeds and told her it was amazing that a big watermelon could grow from such a tiny seed. We decided that night to plant some of those seeds. There was a vacant lot next door that had already been cleared for future construction. So we went out there and dug up the dirt and planted twenty or thirty seeds. It was Jenni's job to water the plants every day. Although it wasn't very fertile ground, in a few days we had some vines that started to grow. Then I remember the day Jenni came running in all excited because there was a tiny watermelon growing. We ran out and checked it. It was about the size of a lemon. Soon other melons started growing. Jenni checked the patch every day and was getting impatient because the watermelons weren't growing very fast. She kept saying, "Daddy, daddy, when will those watermelons grow?"

It was soon obvious the dirt was so poor that the melons probably weren't ever going to grow to eating size, but one had grown to about the size of a softball. So one afternoon on my way home from the office I stopped by a curb market and bought a forty-pound watermelon. When I got home I carried it out and placed it in the middle of the vines and even wrapped one of the vines around the stem. I went inside and asked Jenni if she had checked her watermelons today. Because of the slow growth, she had lost her excitement about our watermelon patch. So, she slowly walked outside to check. About thirty seconds later she came running back yelling, "Daddy, daddy, you won't believe what has happened!"

Jesus is going to teach us about planting seeds, but He's not talking about watermelons. He's talking about wheat seeds and mustard seeds.

Mark 4:26-32. "He also said, 'This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.'"

"Again he said, 'What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade.'"

The only kind of mustard most of us are familiar with is the kind you put on a hotdog. Or if you grew up liking turnip greens, you might have sprinkled a few mustard green seeds in there with them. But the reason Jesus talked about the mustard seed was because mustard plants were prolific around the Sea of Galilee.

A seed is a mystery. Jesus said a farmer plants a seed but he doesn't know how it grows. When I was serving my first church out of seminary, we were only about 30 minutes away from Auburn University. There was a man in my church who had a Ph.D. in agricultural science. He ran an experimental farm for Auburn near our town. I recall him talking about this verse once. He said, "Jesus said we don't know how a seed grows. That's no longer true. We know exactly how it grows. Heat and moisture cause the seed to germinate. It sends roots downward for moisture and shoots upward toward the sun. We know HOW a seed grows, but we don't know WHY a seed grows. Only God knows that." Seeds are mysterious and mighty. Seeds have been found in the tombs of the Pharaohs. These 3,000-year-old seeds were planted and they began to grow.

Jesus said that the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that is planted. Let's notice three ways in which God's Kingdom is like a mysterious mighty mustard seed.

I. GOD'S KINGDOM STARTS SMALL

Jesus said, "It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground." (Mark 4:31) The mustard seed isn't the smallest seed in the world, but it was the smallest seeds with which people in Israel were familiar. It is tiny. You could put 200 mustard seeds on the face of a penny. It takes almost a thousand mustards seeds to weigh even an ounce.

Once there was a group of tourists visiting a city in Europe. One of the tourists asked the guide, "Were there any famous men born in this city?" The guide said, "Nope. Only babies."

The Kingdom of God started with a baby placed in a manger in Bethlehem. Even when Jesus died, the Kingdom was still small. Dr. R.C. Trench was an Irish pastor in the 1800s. He wrote these words concerning God's Kingdom: "The Son of man was born in obscurity and grew up in a despised province. He did not appear in public until his thirtieth year; then taught for only three years in neighboring villages, and occasionally in Jerusalem. He had only a few followers, chiefly among the poor and unlearned. Then falling into the hands of His enemies, He died a shameful death on a cross. Thus was the commencement of the Kingdom of God." (*Notes on the Parables of our Lord*, p. 88)

God specializes in taking small, insignificant things and making them mighty. After the First Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians, the Jews returned from the exile and started to rebuild the Temple. They had very little money and few materials. There were many who doubted the Temple could be rebuilt, but Zerubbabel, the governor believed that it would happen.

The prophet Zechariah wrote these words on the day that Zerubbabel laid the first stone. "Who despises the day of small things? Men will rejoice when they see the plumb line in the hand of

Zerubbabel.” (Zechariah 4:10) The Temple was ultimately rebuilt, although it wasn’t nearly as beautiful and ornate as Solomon’s Temple. It started with the laying of one stone.

Never despise the day of small beginnings. Years ago on a snowy evening in England, a young teenager was trying to find his church building. Due to the blinding snow, he turned instead into a little Methodist Chapel. The preacher didn’t make it that night due to the weather and there were only a handful of people there. One of the men of the church stood up and spoke on one verse from Isaiah. “Look unto me and be saved, all the ends of the earth.” At that moment a mustard seed of faith was planted in the heart of that teenager for the first time...His name was Charles Haddon Spurgeon, who would later go on and preach the Gospel to thousands and build a 5,000 seat auditorium in London that was never big enough to accommodate the crowds.

II. GOD’S KINGDOM GROWS STEADILY

Jesus continued, “Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants.” (Mark 4:32) The mustard plant can grow to a height of fifteen feet. That’s a huge plant from such a tiny seed. The same is true of the Kingdom of God. From the tiny beginning of the Kingdom in a baby in Bethlehem, God’s Kingdom has grown remarkably. The Church of the Lord Jesus started with only a few people and has grown into a global family.

Jesus called 12 disciples to make up His inner core of believers and one of those was a spiritual dropout. He told them to change the world. On the Day of Pentecost, these 11 disciples were joined by 109 other people who were praying in the upper room. The Bible says, “In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty).” (Acts 1:15) To give you an idea of the size of the first congregation, that’s about how many people are in John Child’s Friendship SMBS class each Sunday.

These 120 folks prayed for ten days, and on the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came and filled the disciples. Peter preached a Pentecostal sermon and the Bible says, “Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day...and the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” (Acts 2:41, 47) Almost overnight, the church grew from 120 to 3,000—and then to 5,000 in a matter of days. Today there are about 2 billion people that claim to be Christians.

Green Acres is part of a movement called The Billion Souls Network. This is a movement that was the dying vision of Bill Bright who started Campus Crusade. James O. Davis has continued the vision since Bill Bright went to heaven. James O. Davis will be preaching here at GABC in September. The Billion Souls Network is a partnership of over 2,000 ministries and denominations and almost 500,000 churches. We’re committed to planting 5 million new churches by 2021. Since this movement began in 2001, there are over 600 million new believers worldwide. That’s a tiny mustard seed growing into a massive plant.

For instance, consider what God is doing in China. In 1949 it was estimated there were less than 400,000 Christians in China. Today, a conservative estimate is that there are 163 million Christians in China. That means there are more Christians in China than in the U.S. but this number only represents 12% of China’s population of 1.4 billion people.

God's Kingdom will continue to grow until one day in heaven there will be a multitude too large to count. John described this vision he had of the throne room of heaven, "After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb." (Revelation 7:9)

The growth of God's Kingdom isn't only true in terms of the numerical growth of the Church. But God's kingdom grows in you as well. What is the Kingdom of God? Usually when you think of a kingdom you think of thrones, armies, and nations. But Jesus taught there are two aspects of the Kingdom of God. There is the future kingdom when Jesus will rule and reign over the whole earth when He returns. But for now, the Kingdom of God is within us. And just as a seed grows, we grow toward Christian maturity.

What is the Kingdom of God? The Bible says, "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." (Romans 14:17) Paul was addressing the fact that some Christians in Rome were still hung up on what a Christian should eat or drink—religious taboos. He reminded them that God's Kingdom isn't about religious observance. It is about the righteousness we receive in Christ. It is about the inner peace we enjoy through Christ. It is about the overflowing joy that we have in Jesus. Like a mustard seed, there should be a growing awareness of righteousness, peace, and joy in our lives. But there is one other way in which the mustard seed illustrates God's Kingdom.

III. GOD'S KINGDOM OFFERS SHELTER

Jesus described the mustard plant, "...with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade." (Mark 4:32) As I've been in Israel it's not unusual to see small birds landing on the branches of the mustard plant; some even build nests in them. There's a spiritual application here. Just as the mustard seed provides shelter for the birds, we find protection and shelter in God's Kingdom. The Bible says, "He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty." (Psalm 91:1) Let me share with you at least three ways in which you can find shelter and protection in the branches of God's Kingdom.

A. In God's Kingdom you find rest from the weariness of life

Are you tired? Are you weary? Jesus has a personal invitation to you. He says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." (Matthew 11:28-29) Just as the birds find rest and shelter in the mustard plant, we can find rest for our souls in Jesus. The yoke of Jesus isn't a heavy wooden yoke like oxen use. It's light because Jesus is on the other side providing all the strength and direction we need. You can yoke up with Jesus today, and that's no joke.

Can you imagine the life of a little bird? They fly around, but they can't stay in the air forever. They need a place to land and rest. Does that describe your life? Are you so tired of going, going, going, and working, working, working? Do you need a place to land and rest?

Jesus used God's care of the birds to illustrate the fact that we shouldn't worry. He said, "Consider the birds of the air. They don't work or worry. But their heavenly Father takes care of them." One of my favorite poems is an imaginary conversation between two birds. "Said the Robin to the Sparrow; I'd really like to know; Why these anxious human creatures rush about and worry so. Said the Sparrow to the Robin; I think that it must be; That they have no Heavenly Father such as cares for you and me."

B. In God's Kingdom you find shelter from God's wrath against sin

The prophet Zephaniah proclaimed, "Seek the Lord...Seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the Lord's anger." (Zephaniah 2:3) One day, God's wrath against sinful humanity will be poured out. Will you be sheltered? That Old Testament "PERHAPS you will find shelter" has been transformed into the New Testament CERTAINTY that there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

During the old days of the Wild West, sometimes there were great prairie fires that would burn out of control. Driven by the wind, the fire would travel so fast it was impossible to outrun it. But the cowboys had a way of avoiding the fire—and I'm not talking about the Dallas Cowboys—I'm talking about the real cowboys. He would get off his horse and set fire to a spot where he was. After the fire had burned the ground black, he and his horse would step into the burned out patch of ground. When the oncoming prairie fire arrived it couldn't harm him because the fire had already burned that ground. There is only one place where the fire of God's wrath against sin has already fallen. That was at the cross of Jesus. So, if we want to be sheltered from God's wrath, we simply must stand on the ground that God already judged. Jesus took our punishment. Will you stand at the cross and accept the shelter Jesus provides? If not you'll have to face the full brunt of God's judgment against sin.

C. In God's Kingdom you find eternal protection and peace

John continued to describe the multitude in heaven this way: "They are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them...For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd...And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." (Revelation 7:15, 17) In Jesus, we find help for today, but also hope for tomorrow.

Heaven is for real. It was real before there was a book and movie by that name. It's beyond our wildest imagination. There are some things we have to put up with here on earth that won't be there. There will be no more sickness, sorrow, or death. There will be no darkness or wickedness there. There will be no more tears in heaven.

In 1991 Eric Clapton wrote and recorded a Grammy-winning song called, "Tears in Heaven." He wrote it with a broken heart after his five-year-old son, Conor, fell from the balcony on the fifty-third floor apartment in New York. In the song he asked the question, "Would you know my name; If I saw you in heaven? Would you feel the same; If I saw you in heaven? I must be strong and carry on; 'Cause I know I don't belong here in heaven."

I'm sorry for your loss, Eric. But God created us to spend eternity with Him in heaven. I love C.S. Lewis' famous quote on heaven. He wrote: "If I find in myself desires which nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world." You and I were made for another world. There is shelter in the Kingdom of God.

A Sunday School teacher was teaching her class of children about heaven. She wanted them to understand how important it was to believe in Jesus to go to heaven. She asked the class, "Boys and girls what do you have to do in order to go to heaven?" One little boy shot his hand up and said, "You have to die!" That's true actually. Are you ready to meet the Lord?

CONCLUSION

What's the take-away truth of the parable of the mystery of the mighty mustard seed? God delights to bring great things out of humble beginnings. God always starts small, but He can bring great things out of humble beginnings.

Consider Moses. God took a stuttering, washed-out 80-year-old mustard seed and used him to deliver God's people. Consider Gideon. Instead of an army of 32,000 God used 300 mustard seeds to defeat an army of over 100,000. Consider David. He was the youngest son in a family of great brothers, the runt of the litter. He was given the job nobody else wanted. But he was a man after God's own heart and God took this mustard seed of a man and turned him into a giant-killer. One day a little mustard seed of a boy gave Jesus his lunch of five biscuits and two sardines, and Jesus fed a multitude with it.

Sometimes little words spoken at the right time to the right person have a huge impact. One of my spiritual heroes is John Wesley who founded the Methodist Church. Wesley rode a horse tens of thousands of miles around England preaching in fields and town squares because the Anglican Church defrocked him. Late one night a thief accosted Wesley. He was told to hand over his money or die. Wesley got down off his horse and emptied his pockets. He showed the thief he only had a few coins but that he was welcome to them. He invited the thief to examine his saddlebags and search for anything else of value. In disgust the thief turned to leave and Wesley said, "Stop! I have something more to give you!" The thief returned and Wesley bent near his ear and said, "You may someday live to regret this life. And if you do, remember these few words: "The blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses us from all our sin." The robber hurried away.

Years later a stranger asked to speak to Wesley after he preached. He immediately recognized him as the thief, but now he was a well-dressed merchant—and better still, a follower of Jesus. The man knelt and kissed John Wesley's hand and said, "To you, sir, I owe it all. Your words changed my life." He gladly returned the money he had stolen. Wesley said, "No, not to me, my friend, but to the precious blood of Jesus Christ, which cleanses us from all our sin."

There may be someone listening to me right now and you are regretting the life you are living. I want to speak those same few words to you again: "The blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses us from all sin." Let God plant that seed in your heart and see what happens!

OUTLINE

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"In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty)." *Acts 1:15*

"After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb." *Revelation 7:9*

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"He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty." *Psalms 91:1*

In God's Kingdom you find:

A. Rest from the weariness of life

Jesus said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." *Matthew 11:28-29*

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"Seek the Lord...Seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the Lord's anger." *Zephaniah 2:3*

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes