

Biblical Studies/New Testament Commentaries/The Gospel of
Mark/Chapter 4

Is the effort to follow Jesus, to live in and to proclaim the Kingdom of God worthwhile? Why does the preaching and teaching of the gospel not bear more fruit? What difference, if any, does hearing the gospel make? What do hearing, seeing, and understanding mean in this passage and in life? Do the parables in this chapter each have a single meaning? If so, what is it? If not, what limits, if any, does the text impose on meanings we find in the parables? How do parables work, anyway? How are we to receive them? (Williamson)

These are some of the questions Mark 4:1–34 answers ... and raises. They seem simple on the surface, but once you dig down deep and try to find the answer they are very challenging questions. The parabolic discourse of Jesus in Mark invites a deepening dialogue through which we begin to perceive the promise of the kingdom and in which we encounter Jesus repeated call to hear. (Williamson)

The sower and the soils (vv. 1-20)[\[edit\]](#)

This parable helped the disciples understand why Jesus was not impressed by the large crowds that followed Him. He knew that most of them would never produce fruit from changed lives, because the Word He was teaching them was like seed falling into poor soil. The seed represents God's Word and the sower is the servant of God who shares that Word with others. The human heart is like soil: it must be prepared to receive the seed before that seed can take root and produce a harvest. As in that day, so today, there are four kinds of hearts and they respond to God's message in four different ways: the hardened heart, the shallow heart, the crowded heart, and the fruitful heart. (MacDonald)

Each of the three fruitless hearts is influenced by a different enemy: the hard heart the devil himself that snatches the seed; the shallow heart the flesh rejects religious feelings; the crowded heart has the things of the world smothering the growth and preventing a harvest. These are the three great enemies of the Christian: the world, the flesh, and the devil.

The Seed Growing (vv.26-34)[\[edit\]](#)

The second parable gave the disciples both warning and encouragement. The encouragement was that, from very small beginnings the kingdom of heaven would eventually grow in size and in influence. While a mustard seed is not the smallest seed in the world, it was the smallest of seeds used by the farmers of that region and perfectly illustrated the growth potential within the kingdom of heaven. In spite of the sins and weaknesses of the church, the message has been carried to other nations; and one day, saints from every nation shall worship before His throne. Through faith in Jesus Christ, we become citizens of the heavenly nation, children in God's family, and subjects of the King of kings and Lord of lords.

Jesus Calms the Storm (vv.35-41)[\[edit\]](#)

“The same day” refers to the day on which Jesus gave the “parables of the kingdom.” He had been teaching His disciples the Word and now He would give them a practical test to see how much they had really learned. After all, the hearing of God's Word is intended to produce faith; and faith must always be tested. We must also be able to practice that lesson by faith, and that is one reason why God permits trials to come to our lives. Jesus can be trusted in the storms of life. (MacDonald)

Original Language[\[edit\]](#)

When people talk about the original language of Mark they mention either Greek or Aramaic. Greek is the language of the oldest surviving ancient manuscripts. Those who refer to Aramaic are speculating about a non-existent earlier version or recognizing that Jesus and his earliest followers probably used Aramaic as their first language for most communication.

Commentary on Mark 4[\[edit\]](#)

Parables by the Sea (4:1–2)[\[edit\]](#)

Parable in the Greek (*parabolē*) is composed of two words (*para*, beside and *ballō*, to cast). Thus, a parable is a rhetorical device to explain truth. The word parable is used in Greek much more broadly than in English. In the New Testament the word parable is used to

refer to all these sorts of comparisons and others, too, including proverbs and riddles.(MacDonald)

These parables in Mark 4 are unlike the other Markan parables for two different reasons. In these parables they are not introduced with the formula “the kingdom of God is like.” It describes Jesus reactions to the preaching and teaching of the kingdom. Second, it also differs from the others in that it alone is accompanied by an explanation. (Bratcher) The text takes us with a large crowd to the sloping hillside beside the lake where grain fields run down to the water. The great emphasis on Jesus as teacher in Mark comes to a focus in the following discourse, the first and longest single collection of the teachings of Jesus in this Gospel. The crowd is continuing evidence of Jesus growing popularity. The crowd also signals to the reader that the teaching which will follow is for everybody.(Bratcher)

Parable of the Sown Seed (the Sower) (4:3–9)[\[edit\]](#)

Commonly called the parable of the sower, this story appears in all three Synoptic Gospels. In Matthew and Mark it is presented as the prime example of Jesus parabolic teaching. Interpreters largely agreed on its importance but differ widely on its meaning. There is such an open-endedness that allows literary critics to view the sower as a parable about parables.

The parable is true to what is known about ancient Palestinian agriculture. The sower held an apron with one hand and broadcast the seed with the other. It was inevitable that some would fall upon the hardened path through the field, some where the soil was too shallow, and some among thorns, and as well as on good ground. (Bratcher) Unlike the modern method, the seed was sown first and then plowed under. Clumps of thistles were evident at the time of sowing, but would disappear with the plowing. The seeds encounter various fates: Birds eat those that fall on the path which is not ploughed; rocks leave little room for roots in some parts of the field; thistle seeds got plowed into the dirt with the seeds and choke the grain; and there was the soil that is good, the yield varies from stalk

to stalk. Though the seeds meet different fates, the overall destiny of the scattered seed is fulfilled when the sower's vision becomes reality.(Brooks)

This parable speaks in both individual and corporate settings. It addresses the lives of persons who have heard the gospel but in whom it has not yet taken root; committed Christians who are for the moment spiritually dry; congregations, church boards, and whole Christian community which are disheartened by periods of sterility. It speaks of a power whose life-giving potential is irrepressible.

Some commentators suggest that there are two central themes in this parable: encouragement and discouragement. The three kinds of wasted seed followed by three degrees of increasingly abundant yield, the contrast between disappointing beginnings and great results, and the confident initiative of the sower despite the waste inherent in the act of sowing. What the listener is exhorted to hear is good news. Sown seed is rich with promises, and so is the Kingdom of God. Jesus may have told the story to encourage his hearers to see in him and hear in his words the presence of the Kingdom of God in their midst, a kingdom whose abundant fruitfulness only the future would reveal.(Bratcher)

The parable of the sown seed is significant in various situations of discouragement. When their work seems fruitless, this parable announces good news. The future promises an abundant yield, despite apparent reverses. Its applicability to those who spread the word may explain why this parable has been called "the sower."

About Parables (4:10–12)[\[edit\]](#)

Jesus speaks of how parables function. They serve as revelation to disciples "those inside" and to the crowd "those outside." For insiders, members of the believing community, parables have a revelatory function: "To you has been given the secret (mystērion) of the kingdom of God."(Brooks) In Mark, Jesus communicates no privileged information about the kingdom. Rather, in the authentic speaking and hearing of the parables, Jesus gives the kingdom itself as a mystery; the secret is the kingdom. The Kingdom of God is at

hand in the fruitful word of Jesus Christ. To hear the word about Jesus, to believe it and act on it, this is the secret of the reign or rule of God in individuals, in the church, and in the world.

We may better understand “the secret of the kingdom of God” to be Jesus himself, present among those to whom he speaks. Jesus is present to us in his word, a word in which the Kingdom of God is given in veiled and parabolic form. The word “secret” (“mystery”) is found in the Gospels only here and in the parallels. It appears, twenty-one times in Paul’s letters and four in Revelation. Paul used it to mean a truth that was not known in the past, that cannot be known apart from divine revelation, and that has recently been revealed by God. This meaning best explains the present passage. The “secret” or better “revealed truth” is that the kingdom of God has drawn near in Jesus Christ. (Brooks)

The word about the function of parables for “those outside” includes a serious theological problem. Does God deliberately harden the hearts of some people so that they will not repent and be forgiven? Does Jesus tell parables in order to hide the truth from some people?

In Matthew the disciples ask the question, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” (13:10) and the answer Jesus gave them was, “because ... they do not see” (13:13). But why do some fail to see and hear rightly?

This explanation about parables was encouraging to the early readers of Mark in several ways. First, to the community of faith the Kingdom of God is given in parables. Second, Christian preachers need be neither surprised nor discouraged if not all hearers receive their message; the outcome is in the hand of God. Third, though the initial effect of parables (and of Christian preaching and teaching) may be to reveal the truth and harden hearts, their ultimate purpose is to reveal, to illumine, and to save.

Interpretation of the Sown Seed (the Soils) (4:13–20)[\[edit\]](#)

Most critical scholars deny that the explanation is from Jesus and attributes it to early Christians, who applied the parable to their own situation. Many objections have been given. One is that by the nature of the case, parables are so clear that Jesus would never have needed to explain them. (Brooks) The second explanation to the disciples is no longer about parables in general; it's about this particular parable, the sown seed. The disciples should understand but they do not. The reader is led to ask, "What kind of soil am I?" (Brooks)

Many different commentators have different opinions on what each of the soils mean. The first type of soil is the seed that fell onto the path and the birds of the air came and ate the seeds. Many commentators say that the "hard heart" the seed that falls on the path. The "hard heart" is the person that resists the Word of God and makes it easy for Satan (the birds) to snatch it away. The second type of soil is the seed that fell in a rocky place. Stony ground may have enough soil to cause initial growth, but there is no depth to keep the plant growing. (MacDonald) This type of soil represents the shallow heart. This heart is thin like the soil on a rock, very typical to Palestine. Since there is no depth, whatever is planted cannot last because it has no roots. This represents the "emotional hearer" who joyfully accepts God's Word but does not really understand the price that must be paid to become a genuine Christian. The third type of soil is the one that fell among the thorns. This soil represents the people that have the crowded heart. This heart pictures the person who receives the Word but does not truly repent and remove the "weeds" out of his or her heart. This hearer has too many different kinds of "seeds" growing in the soil, worldly cares, a desire for riches, a lust for things, and the good seed of the Word has no room in which to grow. The fourth and final soil is the seed that fell on good soil. This seed represents the fruitful heart. This heart pictures the true believer, because fruit, a changed life, is the evidence of true salvation. The other three hearts produced no fruit, so we conclude that they belong to persons who have never been born again. Not all true believers are equally as productive; but from every genuine

Christian's life, there will be some evidence of spiritual fruit.
(MacDonald)

Unlike the open-ended parable (vv. 3–9), the interpretation (vv. 13–20) specifies referents for six details; the seed (the word), the birds (Satan), and the four kinds of soil. The soil can be either the hearers or the difficulties hearers face; and hearers are likened to be the soil, which is receptive in various degrees, and to the plants, which spring up to wither or to bear fruit. The teaching, however, is clear.(Brooks) The language used in this allegorizing interpretation and the problems to which it points reflect the life of the early church. In this explanation the church applies Jesus parable of the scattered seed to her own experiences in preaching and hearing the gospel “the word”.(Smith)

The one term that is constant throughout all four of the allegorical interpretation is “hear.” The story is about four kinds of hearers: those who hear but immediately reject the message; those who hear gladly but not persistently; those who hear many conflicting voices along with the gospel; and those who hear, receive, and act appropriately upon the gospel. Verses 13–20 focus on how we are to hear the gospel.(Smith) When the word of Jesus Christ confronts us in any form, we are challenged to be receptive, persistent, single-minded, and responsive.

Sayings About Light and Hearing (4:21–25)[\[edit\]](#)

In Greek the verse reads “A lamp does not come in order to be put under a measuring-bowl or under a bed, does it?” In the Greek it has two means: the lamp is an allusion to Jesus coming as a light into the world. Or in the present context, the lamp refers primarily to the parabolic teaching of Jesus. Jesus parables are meant to be understood just as surely as a lamp is meant to give light.(France)

The more carefully we give attention to the word, the more we shall hear. As indicated in the comments on v. 3 (Listen!), the command to hear suggests that some do not hear and understand parables (France). Fruitful hearers of the gospel are given to hear even more; fruitless hearers will, after a time, hear nothing at all. The way we

hear the gospel each time it is presented makes a difference in our capacity to hear it next time. The final word, “and from him who has not ...” is a warning to lazy or indifferent listeners. Yet even in this word of exhortation the note of encouragement is present. At the heart of the final pair of sayings lies a great promise to those who hear, receive, and respond: “... still more will be given you. For to him who has will more be given.”

For believers, the parables convey the Kingdom of God as a secret; but the true nature of God’s rule will become evident to them in the death and resurrection of Jesus. For outsiders, all may be in riddles now, but a riddle is told only to be answered or revealed eventually. Insiders and outsiders, therefore, are encouraged to keep on listening. What is obscure at the beginning will be clear at the end.

Verses 21–25 contain five or six sayings of Jesus that technically are wisdom sayings dealing with lessons from everyday life but that are easily included under the broad term “parables.” There is one in each verse, and perhaps there are two in v. 24. More is involved in vv. 21–25 than the understanding of parables. The idea of understanding Jesus is also present. During his ministry he was not understood even by his disciples. The best explanation is that the lamp is representing either Jesus as well as the kingdom of God that drew near with his coming. Jesus and the kingdom did not come to be hidden but to be revealed to all. Such revelation, however, could not be made fully until after Jesus’ death and resurrection (Williamson).

In verse 22 the statement seems to contradict v. 21 by indicating that a lamp may be hidden temporarily. Jesus and the kingdom were in fact concealed temporarily. Jesus was fully revealed following his resurrection, but the kingdom will not be fully realized until the consummation. This verse informs the “messianic secret.” (Williamson)

In verse 25 there is both a promise and a warning about understanding the parables. Whoever acquires some understanding and wants more will receive more. Proper understanding will lead to

accepting Jesus and entering the kingdom and to more and more blessings from God. Those who have no interest in parables and the kingdom about which they teach will soon find themselves further from it than before they ever heard about it. (Williamson)

Parable of the Seed Growing of Itself (4:26–29)[\[edit\]](#)

Each is introduced by “and he said”; each states the referent explicitly (the Kingdom of God); each is offered without explanation and belongs to Jesus’ teaching to the crowd, like the original parable (vv. 3–9). Verses (27, 28) call attention respectively to the mysterious growth of the seed and to the astonishing fertility of the earth. (Williamson) The point is that the Kingdom of God grows in a hidden, mysterious way, independently of human effort. Though the parable speaks of growth, its meaning is not that the Kingdom of God develops naturally in history thanks to human efforts; nor is the function of the parable hortatory. Rather, growth is spoken of as the miraculous work of God and harvest as an outcome that is both gift and miracle. (Guelich)

The parable is significant whenever and wherever we Christians take ourselves and our efforts too seriously, seeking by our plans and programs to “bring in the kingdom of God.” The reign or rule of God is like seed growing of itself: pregnant, mysterious, and fruitful. As a man scattering seed on the ground, we work at preaching and teaching, at supporting each other, at serving those in need, and at creating a more just social order. Our efforts sometimes seem to be in vain, but in the end we shall marvel, as a sower at harvest. (Guelich)

The parable of the seed growing by itself has its own unique message to convey. The sower plays a minimal role. Furthermore, the seed grows without his effort (or lack of effort) and in a way that is a mystery. The success of the Christian message similarly does not depend upon human effort or understanding, though Christians certainly need to scatter the seed, but upon divine power. It will succeed precisely because God is active. The end emphasis and perhaps primary focus of the parable is the assurance of the harvest. The harvest almost certainly represents the judgment at the end of

the age. Jesus by telling the story, and Mark by recording it, encouraged disciples who were experiencing rejection of their message and frustration at their lack of understanding of God's mysterious purposes that God's kingdom would surely come. (Williamson)

Parable of the Mustard Seed (4:30–32)[\[edit\]](#)

This parable is about hope in the Kingdom of God. It also affirms that God will accomplish great results from small beginnings. The parable of the mustard seed speaks of a kingdom which, for all its miraculous extension, remains lowly. Mustard is an annual plant; its perpetuation depends on renewed sowing, and its perennial promise depends on the life of the seed. (Guelich) It is an image which corresponds closely to the picture of the Kingdom of God in Mark: a mystery whose realization will come as a surprise; a reality whose weakness is its power.

Undoubtedly emphasis falls on the contrast between the small beginning and the enormous consummation of the kingdom. The mustard seed was not the smallest seed in Palestine, but it was one of the smaller and was proverbial for smallness. The mustard plant could grow to heights of ten to twelve feet and attain a thickness of three or four inches. The difference between the tiny seed and the huge herb that grows from it is an excellent illustration of the difference between the beginning and end of the manifestation of the kingdom of God. Mark and his readers/hearers were much nearer to the beginning than the end. Nor is the greatness of the kingdom readily apparent nineteen centuries later! Growth is not the main emphasis; contrast between the beginning and the end is the main point of comparison. (Guelich) The function of the story is encouragement, the issue is hope, and the mode of teaching is metaphor. Interpretation, therefore, should point to meaning but should not pontificate; it should suggest significance but should not define it, to the end that the weary may be sustained by the word.

Conclusion: Jesus' Parabolic Teaching (4:33–34)[\[edit\]](#)

The conclusion preserves the distinction between public proclamation and private instruction, as well as the tension between the revelatory intention of parables (“... as they were able to hear it,”

v. 33) and the effect of concealment from outsiders and revelation to insiders (v. 34). Parables reveal the Kingdom of God, but reveal it as a mystery. They do this by drawing attention to the mystery and miracle in commonplace activities and events.

Verse 33 implies that Mark presented only a small selection of what Jesus taught. The same is true of the other Gospel writers so that no one of them or all of them together give a complete account of everything that Jesus did or taught. Again Mark emphasized the necessity of understanding. (MacDonald)

We are called not to explain the mysteries of God in prosaic language that makes them commonplace nor in esoteric language that stifles understanding. Rather, the teaching of Jesus invites us to see and to hear God in the familiar rounds of daily life and in familiar texts like this one ... to sit still and contemplate quietly until the commonplace wakes our minds and hearts to wonder. The significance of Mark 4:1–34 for all persons lies in the repeated invitation, “Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear.” To such is given the secret of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus Calms the Storm (4:35-41)[\[edit\]](#)

When Jesus was done teaching He had a very busy day because it includes everything from Mark 3:22-Mark 4 (MacDonald). It is evening, after a full and exhausting day of teaching. Jesus decision to cross to the other side is the only way he and his disciples can leave the crowd. “In the boat, just as he was” means to draw attention not to Jesus appearance but to the boat, that he used as a pulpit from which to teach. As the wind and the waves fill the boat with water, the disciples become fearful (v. 40a). They are sinking, and they realize they might drown (v. 38)! In terror they waken him with words we often address to God: “Do you not care?”

In the original text, Jesus speaks only two words at this point, both in the imperative: “Be quiet! ... Be still!” The simplicity and brevity of his command to the wind and waves express the assurance of one who is in control. The response of the natural elements to his command is evidence of his authority.(France)

The text takes the form of a miracle story: a setting which ties the story into its present context (vv. 35–36), a problem (vv. 37–38), a solution (v. 39a), evidence that the miracle has occurred (v. 39b), and a response of wonder (v. 41). (MacDonald) The concluding question of the disciples, “Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?” shifts the focus back to Jesus and to the question of his identity. By its structure, the text addresses two questions to the reader. Who is Jesus? Will you trust him?

The stilling of the storm, like the other miracles that are not healings affirms that Jesus Christ is the “ruler of all nature.” Nature miracles are, however, appropriate because they establish Jesus authority over the inanimate part of creation just as the healings do over the animate part. Such miracles show that God is the Lord of nature as much as he is of individuals. The Sea of Galilee was and still is infamous for sudden squalls. Surrounded by mountains at most points, the lake swirls violently when a strong wind enters (Bratcher).

This may have been the main function of the story as it first circulated among the miracle-seeking common folk who flocked to see, hear, and touch Jesus, as well as when the earliest Christian missionaries used it to testify that Jesus Christ is Lord. In its present setting in the Gospel of Mark, however, the story addresses a community of believers in Jesus Christ who, in the guise of the disciples, are challenged to trust Jesus more.

The words translated “rebuked” and “be still” were used in 1:25 with reference to an exorcism. This consideration may imply a demonic element in the storm. Jesus’ response indicates that the disciples should have had faith rather than fear, and he rebuked them for their lack of faith. Some commentators have claimed that Jesus was advocating faith in God rather than in himself. Mark understood the meaning to be faith in the saving power of God as revealed in the action of Jesus. Mark likely intended to indicate that faith is more than intellectual assent, that it is trust in a Person. This kind of faith Jesus’ original disciples should have had and all subsequent disciples should have. (France)

Faith according to Mark means in part recognition that Jesus is Christ and Son of God, but in this unit faith means primarily the trust which the disciples lacked when they feared for their lives and cried out in panic.

Theological Implications[\[edit\]](#)

In Mark chapter 4 there are two main theological implications: The kingdom of God and disciples. The kingdom refers to the rule or reign of God. . The primary representative of that kingdom in Mark's gospel is Jesus, who proclaimed "the good news of God: 'The time has come. The kingdom of God is near.

In the parable of the sower, Jesus referred to understanding its message as an aspect of the "secret of the kingdom of God" (4:11) which had been given to His disciples. The seed which is sown is "the word" (v. 14) which Jesus proclaimed. Those described as "good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop" (v. 20).

The parable of the growing seed Mark (4:26–29), is a reminder to those who "scatter seed" that the life-giving power of God's Word is effective even if it is to a certain extent unfathomable. This, like the parable of the mustard seed (vv. 30–32), shows that the progress of the kingdom is ultimately God's doing. However small and inauspicious it may seem, the kingdom will enjoy a grand and glorious final result. But that will be because the work of God, not only in name but also in fact, is finally His.(Zuck)

Mark tells it how it is when it comes to the disciples. Mark showed how prone they were to misunderstanding. He used various terms to describe this failing, which was characteristic of the disciples at least until Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ (8:29). Yet even after that, Mark demonstrated that the implications of Jesus' messiahship continued to be lost on the disciples who recoiled from the idea of a suffering and dying Messiah. As Jesus said to their spokesman, Peter,

“You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men” (8:33).(Zuck)

The first reference to the disciples’ lack of understanding occurs in the Parables’ Discourse (4:1–34). Jesus cited Isaiah 6:9–10 as an explanation of why He used parables, so that “they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!” (4:12). The problem, as Mark indicated, was that the disciples had problems with understanding as well! “The secret of the kingdom of God has been given” to the disciples (4:11), but apparently there was a communication breakdown (or at least a “slowdown”) somewhere along the line because Jesus questioned why they did not understand the basic point of the parable: “Then Jesus said to them, ‘Don’t you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?’ ” (4:13).(Zuck)

It is interesting to compare the parable of the sower in Matthew and Mark in relation to this point. Matthew began his account of the parable’s explanation with these words: “When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart” (Matt. 13:19). The parallel in Mark (4:15) is similar except that he did not include the phrase “does not understand,” probably because his portrayal of the disciples shows this to be a characteristic of them as well.

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