

## *Out of Obscurity*

Matthew 13:31-33

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This whole section that includes these parables actually begins not in chapter 13 but in chapter 12. And there, we find His family questioning, what exactly are you going to do, Jesus? And Jesus recognizes that His very family is questioning His ministry and what He is trying to do. And He has this question, who is my mother? Who are my brothers? And then He looked out to His disciples, and this is how this whole section of teaching on the parables begins. But it finishes. And when it does, He went away from there. And coming to His hometown, He taught them in their synagogue so that they were astonished. Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty words? They question, how could this guy be teaching this stuff? Do you know who His parents are? Do you know where He's from?

And so, what we learn something about those who are questioning Jesus asking what are you doing? To those saying, wait a second, this guy? This gives us an indication of what these parables of the kingdom are trying to teach us.

And I think it's very appropriate for advent that we're looking at these in this sense. Why in the world would God in trying to solve our need which is to solve the problem of sin and its brokenness in our lives and all of the world, why would He send and come to earth and be in fleshed in human flesh as an infant? Why start there? I could think of a lot of bolder ways to come into this whole process than as an infant, vulnerable, not to a poor family but what about an influential family? I mean, left to our own designs, we would rewrite this entire story. But that is exactly the mystery, the beauty, and the power of the gospel itself. Jesus means to teach us the nature of the kingdom here. It's actually coming out of obscurity. And therein we find the beauty and mystery of the gospel itself.

Hear now God's word drawn from Matthew 13:31-33. Hear now the word of the Lord.

He put another parable before them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

He told them another parable. "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened."

[ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Please pray with me this morning.

Heavenly Father, we now ask that you would take your word and that you would by your Holy Spirit open our hearts and plant it there, that our hope, our trust, our very lives would be transformed by the power of the gospel that comes not with loud voices or loud trumpets, but comes through a child who would become an adult, who would go to a cross, and be raised to life on the third day. If you can bring this kind of glory through what you are doing, then what can you do with your word in our hearts? Not that it would just change our mind. Lord, don't just change our minds. In fact, don't just forgive us of our sins. Lord, change the way that we picture and engage with the whole world because of this truth. Help us, Lord. Help us to receive it. Help the teacher. In Jesus's name. Amen.

In preparing for today, one of the things that I was reading this week I did not intend for it to be anything about the sermon. It was one of the advent readings which a friend of mine had sent to me. And it was written by an author who teaches at Biola University in California. He was writing that he was recently re-watching one of his favorite movies of all time, *The Miracle*, the story of the U.S. hockey team. And he says this.

“The Soviet Union has scored, and the upstart American hockey team is bracing for the onslaught of goals that is sure to come. The fears of the American players are warranted in light of their most recent encounter with the Russian team. Two weeks before the 1980 winter Olympics in Lake Placid, the U.S. team had actually squared off in an exhibition game against the Russians in Madison Square Garden at which the Soviets handily defeated the Americans 10 to 3. Now, with the score of a quick goal in the Olympic rematch, it seemed a massacre was certain.

“I uncomfortably shifted in my chair in front of the television even though I know the end of the story. Because as I’m re-watching my favorite sports movie which tells one of the most famous hockey games ever played, now dubbed the miracle on ice, shockingly, at the end of the first period, the Americans have somehow weathered the storm, and the game is tied 2 to 2. My heart sinks again. The Soviets score quickly to the start of the second period. It’s at this point in the movie that I tell myself, yes, remember they’re going to win.

“And in one of the greatest sports upsets ever, the Americans win the Olympic contest against the Soviets 4 to 3. The game concludes. And ABC sports announcer Al Michaels famously shouted, ‘Do you believe on miracles?’ Americans do, and our team goes on to win gold.”

In some sense, those who had gathered to hear Jesus teaching on the kingdom of God and His disciples who had already been taught and seen demonstrated things by Him should be like this guy sitting watching this movie assured of the outcome because Jesus is. And what’s interesting is this parable comes right after a parable that focuses on what’s going to happen at the end of the age. But that it’s the Lord’s decision how the wheat will be dealt with, the chaff. And so, we can’t go around and decide what’s wheat, what’s not, and pull it up. We can’t do that. That’s up to the Lord. But the focus seems to be on the end and what God’s going to do there.

Now, what He does is He goes back to the beginning still wanting us to understand what will come at the end, but it’s like He’s going to the beginning. And in essence, He’s telling us something about Himself. He’s saying something about the gospel and something about the kingdom.

What we’re going to look at today as you’ll see in the outline is that what we see here is abundant provision, pervasive presence, and glorious encouragement. Are you ready to be encouraged? Are you really? Are you ready to be encouraged? I’m going to challenge that because if all this does is help you in the alleyway of your spiritual life, I don’t want to waste my breath. This is not about me, myself, and Jesus, and how I can be encouraged. This actually revolutionizes the way in which we interact with the world and how we see what’s happening in the world. Are you ready to be encouraged? All right. Let’s go there.

Abundant provision. Here we have it. This first parable that Jesus gives is the parable where He says, “The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed.” So, please note it doesn’t say that the mustard seed leads to the kingdom. No. The kingdom is a mustard seed. So, already, we know that the kingdom is happening in a way we don’t expect. The kingdom comes as the smallest of seeds. Now, let’s not spend a lot of energy. It wasn’t literally the smallest of seeds. Hyperbole is used. Jesus does this in the parables. The point is it starts off in an inconspicuous way, in a very obscure way, as a seed.

Now, the kingdom starting this way to us doesn’t mean a whole lot. But it would mean a whole lot to the original hearers because Jesus is expected to be the Messiah, the leader of the kingdom of Israel, to bring about renewal and restoration. The kingdom is not supposed to come like a mustard seed. Why? Because Israel was caught up at this moment much like many nations around the world in this nationalistic fervor. Why? Because they were being oppressed by the Roman government. They wanted

things to change and change now. Bring it. Solve it. Fix it. We want to be great. That was the promise, was it not? That Israel would be the greatest among nations, a light on a hill.

But here, Jesus is saying the kingdom comes as a mustard seed. To us, it might not seem like a whole lot. It might seem like a nice little parable. But to them, this is not only revolutionary. It's a complete reframing of what the kingdom was to be. The kingdom was supposed to come with battle armaments, with grand plans to overthrow the oppressors, and to return Israel to its greatness. Jesus is saying something completely opposite because it comes as something small. It comes as something inconspicuous, obscure. But it will not stay that way.

And He says here, "It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." Even though it starts off in obscurity, starts off small, this kingdom will grow. Jesus is leading it. It will become something that is a place where you can find shade, where you can find a home. And it will be great. It will be the greatest of everything around it. Jesus is showing that although it might start off and you might doubt its growth, it will become something you can't see yet, but you can imagine it.

And so, He's calling the people of God and His disciples and those that would hear, that if you are to follow me, if you are to hear my word of truth, that the kingdom that I am bringing will not be done through power as the world understands it. It will not be brought through swords and guns and overthrow of oppressors. No. It's going to happen in a way that quite frankly is not only offensive and revolutionary, but it's uncomfortable if we're being honest.

A couple weeks ago, I was visiting with her as she's ailing. She's had two shoulder replacements, and now she's going through a heart cath. And she looks at me. And I'm feeding my mother her first meal after her heart cath, and she goes, did you ever imagine you'd be feeding your mother? I said, well, actually, I probably did. And we're laughing. And I'm doing the airplane sound for her to eat her carrots. I milked that for all it was worth. But she said to me as she's said to me many times, "Randy, growing old is not for the weak." Just like Christianity is not for the impatient.

This is talking about a seed which goes into the ground which cannot be seen which takes the work of nature and takes time, and we can know with our imagination exactly how long it takes to grow into a tree. And when we're honest, we get impatient with that reality. We want God and we want Jesus to fix it. Yes, we understand the gospel declares that "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son." And yes, He died on a cross. But that in and of itself is another picture of the nature of the kingdom, that Jesus, born in a backwater town to a backwater family, is crucified outside the city on a hill of skulls where only criminals were taken, and only then, fewer were given this kind of capital punishment, then buried, and three days rise again. Talk about obscurity. Talk about, are you crazy?

Jesus is telling us something that this has nothing to do with our power, that God will achieve His ends in bringing about salvation and renewal on the earth and will provide such a place where we can find shade and a home. And it is for all nations. This whole use of the imagery of the birds finding a place to nest is a very old thing which we find in the Old Testament including Daniel and Jeremiah where the birds, which represent the nations outside of Israel, will come and find their place under the shade tree of the kingdom of God of which Israel was to be the leader.

So, Israel, in this moment in its nationalistic fervor, is shaking her fists at the Gentile nations and particularly the Roman nation. And yet, Jesus gives us a parable that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that will become a great tree, and the nations including the Roman empire, Gentiles will find a home to nest in the kingdom of God. Are you kidding me?

What does that tell us? It's that the gospel will change everything in its path including those we want to crush. God makes a family out of His enemies. We find it hard enough to love our family members. And if we're really honest about the nature of how the kingdom starts and how it changes, this is telling us that this is going to happen. And it's not contingent on whether we want to participate in it or

not. God's going to do it. And even in the midst of our doubt, our anger, our shaking of fists, our asking God will you do something? God is still doing it. And He's doing it in obscure hidden ways that will one day become visible. And we will all stand by this tree, and we'll say, thanks be to God this is our shade. But when we're honest, we want it differently.

This is why Jesus is teaching His disciples and those who would gather. The kingdom is not going to happen in that bold marching way. No. It's going to be like those pesky seeds I plant in my garden, and I wait, and I wait, I water, and I wait, and finally, I get my tomatoes in August. Maybe. But that's the point. It's not for the impatient. But the outcome is sure. And there is abundant provision not just for those that we think belong in the kingdom, but it will be a home even to those whom we can scarcely imagine that God is at work in their lives drawing them to Himself.

Now, that's something we can participate in. But our participation doesn't mean its success. But He invites us into participating in it. Do we believe the provision of the gospel is for us? What about for our enemy? What about those we disagree with passionately? What about those who hurt us, offend us, insult us, reject us? Is the gospel big enough for them? Jesus is inviting us to see that it's very much big enough.

But let's flip the illustration for just a minute in the event that I haven't made the patience issue enough. This writer of the advent reflection says the following.

"However, what if the American team lost to the Soviets in their Olympic rematch? Let's say they lost by seven or more goals. And in the next 70 games, the young Americans are soundly defeated again and again and again. Would you still retain your faith in U.S. hockey?"

No. There are some people now already wanting to fire coach Saban because he lost to Auburn. They're already thinking about who's next? That's how we roll.

We want God to defeat it now. And we lose trust in His ability. Do you have your hand at work in my life? Is your hand at work? Can I trust you? Are you faithful to your promises? You know that old hymn "Great is thy faithfulness, O God, my Father. There is no shadow of turning with thee. Thou changest not. Thy compassions, they fail not. As thou hast been, thou forever wilt be."

Reflecting on this idea of God's faithfulness to achieve His kingdom, there are seasons in our lives as one writer says,

"when it is not easy at all to trust in the Lord, to believe that God is faithful. Our faith is sorely tried, our eyes bedimmed with tears. We can no longer trace the outworkings of his love in our lives. Our ears are distracted with the noises of the world. We're harassed by all kinds of doubts and accusations that our faith isn't real. We can no longer hear the sweet sound of God's quiet voice reminding us of the truth of his word. The cherished plans which we had for our lives even for our children or for our friends often fail, and we wonder is God at work? Someone who was a brother or sister in Christ stabs us in the back. We are staggered. And we begin to doubt, is God faithful?"

The reality of a tree, the reality of growth which is the beauty of this particular illustration and this metaphor that Jesus chooses, anything which grows in nature has to be batted about by storms and challenges, and the soil, and the atmosphere, and the incompetence, sometimes, of gardeners. And yet, the Lord tells us here that despite all of that, in drought or in beautiful seasons, the kingdom of God through Jesus Christ and His cross will bring about a great tree.

"Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father. There is no shadow of turning with thee." Advent is about waiting and saying, Lord, do not turn your back on me, as the psalmist sings. Hear my cry. May

your faithfulness be renewed in my life today. Help me to drink deeply of the promises that you give us here in this parable. Help me to trust because I am very much doubtful.

Do you know the Lord is okay with that? God is completely okay with us throwing up those doubts and asking Him the big questions. He's okay with us arguing with Him. Job did. But God says to Job, He reminds him after all that argument, I am faithful. I am faithful. I am faithful. Abundant provision.

The next parable, which is very much like the first, but a different metaphor tells us something different about the nature of the kingdom that is inaugurated by Jesus and what will come to full fruition. And that is through leavened bread, this idea of pervasive presence. You see, we need to understand the basic concepts of what's being established for us here in this second parable.

To just do some modern translation, anybody here bakers of bread? Some of you know, so let's do this together. Three measures flour would have been roughly, in new money, 128 cups of flour. And the amount of water needed for that to make all that work would have been roughly 42 cups of water. And it would have equaled about 101 pounds of dough. So, this woman who's baking this, as one writer said, this is no weak woman. She's doing some serious bread baking. And what Jesus tells us here, He says that "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened." What an incredible picture. Three measures, 128 cups. That's roughly 16 five-pound bags. That's a lot. And when you get done with all of this, as this other writer says,

"It's not some elite ball of brioche dough made out of fancy flour for special handling. And it's not some hyper good-for-you chunk of spiritual fad bread full of soy, flour, wheat germ, and pure thoughts. It is just plain 101 pounds of unbaked bread dough."

Much like the seed in the ground, the baked bread takes time. It takes patience. Amen.

And so, the question is if this is the kingdom, and now the kingdom is not a seed but the kingdom is yeast being used to leaven this dough, that's telling us something about the nature of what God is doing in the entire world. That doesn't mean that God's kingdom is only found within the local church. God's kingdom, this dough, is the world. And the yeast, the word of God, Jesus Himself, this kingdom is working itself out and leavening the entire world in ways we can't see, in a mysterious way. We can't go and simply take the yeast and remove it now from the dough. It's all in there, meaning the entire world is God's kingdom. And what He's doing is mysterious. But here's what we know. It's enough to provide enough bread, glorious amounts of it.

And much like our response to the first parable, it's similar to the second. It still requires patience. But as another writer said, it also requires discernment to be able to recognize that this is actually being done. And that it requires vigilance to make sure that all the impatience and the impatient types of people around us who want to call us into despair that God isn't actually at work, it's a reminder that a time is coming. God is at work. It's mysterious. We can't see it, but He's doing it. And we can't do anything about it. This isn't contingent on our participation for its success. God is working.

And so, He invites us, and our participation in it enables us to enjoy and appreciate what God is doing in the world. And our participation in it allows us to be used of God to be about spreading out the kingdom and the way we relate to others, and the way we do our work, and the way we pray.

What do I mean? What I mean is this. I want us to come to this point of a glorious encouragement because this is the best way I could understand to illustrate this particular point. If I were to ask you the question, in what country can we find the fastest growing part of the church of Jesus Christ in the world? It is Iran. According to *Frontier Alliance International* in speaking about this issue, one of them says, "When I ask most westerners, what do you picture when you think of Iranians? The vast majority of Americans and westerners say what they see are angry Muslims shaking their fists and chanting, 'Death to America, death to Israel,' and that sort of thing."

And the reality is that in this country, the country of Iran, the picture of God leavening this work is an incredible thing. Why? What we find in Iran is the fastest growing church in the world. And it's almost entirely from those who have a Muslim background. They have no denominational leanings, they have no governmental recognition or legitimacy, they have no bank accounts, they have no centralized leadership, no Bible schools, no church buildings, and they possess almost no assets. And on top of that, they're almost entirely and largely female led. And no one can go there to train them. In fact, they're traveling at different times of the year and in different parts of the world to other Muslim predominant countries like Indonesia where they're receiving training in what it means to share their faith with those who do not know the Lord Jesus Christ.

And what they testify to is the following. Do you know the greatest evangelist for the gospel today are the Ayatollahs of Iran? Why? Because they say that most of the mosques in Tehran are empty of worshippers. Many have lost any hope of all the promises that would be this Muslim utopia. They don't believe it. And yet, men and women everyday risk their lives knowing that the end of their testimony might very well be death, but they're willing to do it because they know that God is at work.

And so, it's easy for us as westerners, and we want to rip up what looks like chaff. Down with Iran. Down with China. Let's do it. But guess what God is doing which changes the way we engage with the world? They see that the kingdom of God is working in mysterious ways. And the glorious encouragement is God's doing it every single day. And Jesus coming as an infant child, God was saying, I'm doing it every day. I'm fulfilling my promises. And this child at the ripe age of roughly 30 years old begins His public ministry. And now, He's saying to His disciples, the kingdom which I am bringing is much like my incarnation. It is mysterious. It's going to start off small, but it's going to become something big. And just as Jesus shouted from the cross to the Lord, "Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do," we must say, Lord, forgive us, for we do not always know what you are doing, but you're doing it.

And our participation in it is in a glorious encouragement and enjoyment that if God can enter into your heart, into my heart, then there is not one door that is too big, a lock too hard to pick that the gospel cannot pierce through because God's kingdom is like a mustard seed and is like leavened dough. And it is on the move. It changes how we pray. It changes how we think about what God is doing in the world and what we can do to participate in it. It helps us not to get all bogged down in the hysteria that is the modern-day world that says, this is the problem. Aren't you afraid? Our world's coming to an end. God is on the throne. "Great is thy faithfulness, O God, my Father. There is no shadow of turning with thee. Thou changest not. Thy compassions, they fail not. As thou hast been, thou shalt forever will be. Great is thy faithfulness."

Out of obscurity, God brought forth His Son. Out of obscurity, God gave His Son on Golgotha. Out of obscurity and defeat, God raised His Son from the dead. Out of obscurity, the kingdom and the glory and the gospel of grace is on the move. Are you encouraged? Let's pray for it to be at work. Where have you lost hope that God is working? Let's start praying there. In what circumstance, in what trial, in what difficulty have we lost hope that the gospel is at work? Let's pray there. And may the Lord in this advent season and this Christmas season demonstrate to us that what we cannot see that starts off in obscurity, the Lord will work out His promises. May this encourage you as we wait on Him and as we participate in the advance of His kingdom. Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for this truth that the kingdom of the gospel of Jesus Christ is on the move. You are reframing for us the whole idea of what a kingdom coming in power means. It's not by human might or wisdom or discernment. It is by your promises and by your working. And your ways are above our ways. Lord, help us this morning and in this place to hear your Holy Spirit calling us. Pray again in areas of our lives and in circumstances in the world where we have fallen prey to hysteria, to despair, and even to doubt. Thank you that you meet us there. You do not judge us there. You meet us there. And Lord, you call us through these parables to pray again. Lord, may your kingdom come. Out of obscurity, Lord, may your gospel bring life, for if you've done it in us, you can do it in anyone. And you

can do it anywhere. Lord, may the gospel of Jesus Christ and the church of Jesus Christ flourish in Iran and Syria and North Korea and Iraq and China and India and Bangladesh. But Lord, I pray that while we think that the gospel needs to work in places like that in with greater difficulty than ours, Lord, save us from that misunderstanding. For the gospel to be at work on Route 108 is as hard here as it is there. And we need you to help our eyes and our hearts and our minds to be set on what you are doing. Lord, work in us. And may the gospel bring forth great, great fruit. In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.