

The Miracle of Growth
Mark 4:26-29
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Introduction

Today we come to another of Jesus' parables in Mark 4.

- It is the parable of the growing plant in Mark 4:26-29.
- It is only found in the gospel of Mark, none of the other gospels have it.

We are not given an interpretation this time.

- We are told that it is a parable about what the kingdom of God is like, and we have clues for how the seed in the soil refers to the word sown,
 - but there are several ways we might look at this parable—as reflected in different commentaries.
 - Some focus on the farmer, and there does seem to be a lot about him... how he sleeps and wakes up and does not how the plant grows.
 - There is also the focus on how the earth yields by itself—*auto-ma-te* is actually the word in the original Greek.
 - And then many have said much about the gradual development that is described—how it grows slowly from one stage of development to the next.
 - It seems that all of these are brought to our attention here and are worth considering.
 - And then there is a broader difference of interpretation to consider.
 - There are those who look at this parable as a description of the growth of an individual believer...
 - And there are those who look at the parable as referring to the growth and development of the whole kingdom.
 - Both of these are very helpful, and I see no reason not to refer to both of them.
 - One of the advantages of a parable is that it can speak to different matters—growth in God's kingdom happens in a similar way in the individual soul as it does in the kingdom of God.

Listen with care as I read this parable to you.

- Keep in mind that this is the very word of the living God, that same word that has power to call the world into being and sinners from death to life:

Mark 4:26-29: And He said, “The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷ and should sleep by night and rise by day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he himself does not know how. ²⁸ For the earth yields crops by itself: first the blade, then the head, after that the full grain in the head. ²⁹ But when the grain ripens, immediately he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.”

May the Lord add His blessing by the gracious working of His Spirit in all of us as we have heard this word read; and now, with God's help, will hear it preached.

I. We have here what we might call a marvellous miracle!

A. Think about the parable itself.

1. It is really a very banal story—there is nothing unusual here at all.
 - You have a man sowing seed in a field, an action that has been common since the world began.
 - The man does what every man does—he goes to sleep at night and he wakes up in the morning to do his daily tasks... nothing extraordinary except perhaps that this is mentioned at all.
 - Then you have the seed sprouting and growing in a very normal way until the grain appears and it is harvested... just as it ordinarily happens.
2. But if you stop and think about this very common occurrence in nature of a seed growing, it is truly quite a marvellous kind of magic.
 - a. It is common, but it is quite marvellous.
 - Here you take a hard little seed and you bury it in the dirt and then a few days later, if the conditions are right and all is well with the seed,
 - A sprout pokes its way up through the soil... just like that.
 - It doesn't look at all like the seed—and it is bigger than the seed.
 - It doesn't move or change quickly, but it grows and develops.
 - b. And given a little more time, it forms a head and produces way more seeds than the one you planted...
 - And it becomes that which can be eaten by us to nourish us.
 - If you had never seen the process and someone gave you a seed and told you to bury it and a plant would come up with food on it for you to eat if you wait long enough, you would not believe it to be possible.
 - And if they told you that it would have a lot more seeds on it that could also be planted... you would tell them that they were crazy.
 - And then when you saw it, you would wonder what kind of magic it was or what kind of trick they had played on you.
3. We need to stop sometimes and think about all the things that we are around every day that are wonderful and marvellous...
 - God has filled the earth with such things for us...
 - We have rain that falls from the sky and it is something we can drink and something that makes things grow.
 - And all of it works in such a way that the water goes back to the ocean and then back to the sky and then back to the earth again—it is delivered by the clouds to the place where it is needed for our survival.
 - And at other times, we have beautiful white flakes that form in lovely patterns, each unique, and sometimes God sends so many of them that men start to curse—but what a thing it is.
 - A husband and wife and show affection to each other and a child comes out of it. Who could have ever thought of such a marvellous thing?

- And just think of it, that tiny little body grows, forming little fingers with little fingernails, and eyes that can see and ears that can hear, and a heart that will pump blood through the body and nerves, that can feel things and make them move, with everything in its place... a brain that will be able to understand and think and figure things out...
 - And yet each and every child is different and distinguishable from others—yet so very similar that you can tell each one is a child.
 - And now we know of even more wonders with our recent understanding of DNA—that all of this is preprogrammed for each individual.
 - And in each one is a soul that can know God and that can love and feel guilt and happiness...
 - It is crazy, ridiculous, and marvellous... albeit very common.
- Jesus uses this to illustrate something that is also very marvellous and magical.
- B. But wait a minute... perhaps in one way it is not so magical and marvellous... in one way it is actually what could only be expected...
- Let's think about that first, and then we will think about how it is marvellous and magical.
1. The seed sown is surely the word of God sown as it was in the parable of the sower.
 - And that word is the word of the gospel.
 - It is the promise of God to sinners who broke the covenant He made with us at creation.
 - Because we have broken the covenant that He made with us, which amounts to us rejecting Him as our God—refusing to live according to His directives...
 - He has sentenced us to everlasting punishment away from His glorious presence.
 - We see the fruit of our rejecting of Him—we war with each other and we are selfish, and we are estranged from God and the world is full of the evidence of His displeasure...
 - We have storms and famines and terrible diseases and eventually we die and our bodies return to dust.
 - That is our condition.
 - But the seed that is sown is a word of promise.
 - God tells us that He has made arrangements for us to be pardoned and restored to Him.
 - That He has sent His only Son to come here and to be born as a man and then to represent us as our priest who offers the only sacrifice that can secure our pardon so that by it we can be reconciled to God...
 - That's right, the relationship with God can be completely restored by this priest with this sacrifice.
 - And then we are told that the Son of God Himself is not only the priest but also the sacrifice!

- That He had to feel all of our guilt, to take it as His own by association with us, and then to bear the pains of it... to be cut off and cursed, though He was God's Son.
 - And the promise of God is that whoever wants to be pardoned and restored to God need only trust in this sacrifice and God will accept him... and then we can live with God, in His favour and blessing, forever...
 - What is more natural and normal than for us to believe?
2. Now you tell me, is there anything at all strange about guilty sinners hearing this and immediately receiving the good news with joy?
- Well of course not!
 - It is only what you would expect, is it not?
 - Who would not rejoice at such good news?
 - Who would not come and embrace it at once?
 - The marvellous thing, in this respect, is not that such a promise should be welcomed and embraced, but that it should be rejected!
 - There would have to be something terribly wrong with a person to hear such good news and not receive it gladly.
 - And this news proclaimed in the world would be expected to bring the whole world to God.
 - The thing that is hard to believe is that it does not.

TRANS> But now we can think of how it is marvellous that anyone does respond to this good news.

- Do you know how it is marvellous?

C. It is marvellous because we are actually dead in our trespasses and sins.

1. That is what it says in Ephesians 2:1

- **“And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins.”**
- A person who is spiritually dead is obviously a person that cannot respond to God's call in the gospel.
 - It doesn't register with a spiritually dead person.
 - As it says in in 1 Corinthians 2:14,
 - **But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, nor can he know them.**
 - And in Romans 8:7 we are told that **the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be.**
 - And in 2 Cor 4:4, it is says that the god of this world—Satan—has blinded us so that we cannot perceive God.
 - And Jesus Himself told us in John 6:44 that **no one can come to Him unless the Father who sent Him draws him.**

2. So now we see how it is a miracle that a word of promise preached by some ordinary man has the power to made spiritually dead people alive!

- What a marvellous magical thing it is!

- It is much like the word at creation when God said, “Let there be light!” and immediately light appeared...
 - That is all He did to make the light come.
- It is what Jesus did at the tomb of Lazarus when He said to the dead man, “Lazarus, come forth!” and immediately the dead man arose and come to the door of his tomb.
- Just think of how grand it is...
- a. The sinner hears the word—and then one day a little sprout appears in the soil.
 - There it is—in one way, it is not very impressive...
 - but in another way it is—it is obviously, miraculously, alive... it has poked its head up through the soil.
 - It is the sinner coming and professing his faith in Christ.
 - There is life in him.
 - He has responded to God’s call and he is now alive.
 - He has been baptised and is now among the plants of the field.
 - What a lovely thing it is when a field has been sown and the day comes when you start to see life in it...
 - It may be small, it may be just a few here and there, but how lovely it is.
 - How beautiful it is.
 - There is hope for a harvest.
- b. And then the redeemed sinner continues in the word—he abides in it—he continues in the profession that he has made.
 - He endures the winds and the rains and the heat of the sun.
 - Though they threaten him, they also made him grow because he has life from God’s Son and will not draw back to destruction.
 - Yes, there are trials and persecutions, but there he is, strong and true by the gracious working of God’s Spirit.
 - And he also endures the weeds that try to choke the life out of him.
 - He is able to rise above them and not turn away because God has put life in him and he is joined to Jesus.
 - Even these weeds have the end result of making him strong so that he forms a head where the fruit can grow.
 - He was once dead in sin, but now he is truly alive in Christ.
- c. And then that fruit begins to grow—this the third stage.
 - The fruit that God has appointed for him.
 - Fruit that may be described as love and joy.
 - This dead sinner is not able to love God, to worship Him and serve Him with a truly dedicated and grateful heart.
 - He is able to lay down his life for the Lord because of his love for Him.
 - He sees what a great sinner he truly is and how God was so gracious—so much more gracious than he even realised when he started out—to save him.

- And he begins more and more to lay down his life for others... to love them and serve them as Christ loved him.
 - He becomes more and more lovely with the fruit of the Spirit that God gives him.
 - And then when God has finished His work in him, He calls him to come into His glorious presence forever...
 - He departs to be with Christ and to await the resurrection.
 - What a beautiful magical thing to see one who was dead brought to full life from such small beginnings as the word sown.
3. As I mentioned before, we might look at this as of the whole church as well...
- a. That the kingdom comes up as a little sprout—there is a Noah—or an Abraham—or a few disciples of Jesus—
 - And then the kingdom begins to grow and then to bear fruit for God—
 - more and more people are brought in until the head of the grain is full of fruit and our Lord returns to harvest us.
 - b. We might think of a particular congregation or nation as well...
 - For example, seed is being sown in Glenholme, at our daughter church.
 - There is a little sprout of life there.
 - That is the way God’s kingdom works, it is like sprouts that become churches.
 - It is true that not all do—just as it is in nature—but that is what sprouts are meant to do and by God’s grace that is what they do.

TRANS> What a grand, what a delightful thing it is to think about how the seed of a plant and the seed of the word brings forth life.

II. This parable draws our attention to the fact that it is God who causes growth.

- A. We have here displayed to us in a shaft of wheat what Paul said: “I planted, and Apollos watered, but God gave the increase.”
1. Our attention is drawn to the farmer who sows the seed.
 - All he does it put it in the ground.
 - He can fertilize and water, but if it doesn’t grow, there is nothing he can do.
 - The growth does not depend on him.
 - As verse 28 says, the earth yields crops by itself—*auto-ma-te*.
 2. So it is with God’s kingdom.
 - We can sow the seed, we can proclaim the gospel, we can give people things to read, we can tell them of our experience of Christ and of our hope,
 - It is essential for us to do these things... to sow the word.
 - If the word is not sown, there will be no crop.
 - But the growth happens apart from our agency.
 - Two people can hear the same sermon—or the same sermons—one professes his faith, the other is still in the darkness.
 - Two can have the same trials and temptations... one is drawn off to destruction, but the other grows stronger in his faith.
 - There is nothing we can do to make one grow and another die.

- We can give the same warnings, the same encouragements, we can even give more attention to the one that dies.
3. This humbles us.
- We realise that the growth is not something we can cause to happen.
 - We are helpless.
 - The growth is completely in God's hands.
- B. This should encourage us in a number of ways.
1. First, it should encourage us to sow seeds and to encourage one another to continue in the faith.
- If we thought it was up to us, we would despair.
 - But, knowing that God is the one that causes His work to grow, it gives us hope that if we sow the word, He can make it grow.
 - If a farmer waited to sow seed until he figured out how he could make the plant grow, he would never have a crop.
 - He does not know how it works... but he sows and the crop comes.
 - The power is beyond you.
 - We should not rest on our own formulas or techniques, but look to God who makes it grow.
 - We can stick to the message the He has given us to preach without supposing that we can improve it by dressing it up, embellishing it, hiding part of it that might not be attractive (like those who do not tell people about hell)...
 - When we add or take away from what God has said, we actually cause harm—we sow corrupt seed and soon we are sowing the wrong seed altogether.
 - If we trust God, we will sow the word that He has given us to leave it to Him to make it grow.
2. Second, knowing that God makes it grow should encourage us to pray.
- Instead of relying on our ability to sow, we need to pray to God who causes the increase.
 - It is all in His hands, and what's more, He has commanded us and invited us to pray in faith that His kingdom would come.
 - What hope did the disciples of Jesus have when He went away after telling them that they were to take the gospel to all nations?
 - Their hope was not in their strategies, but in God who causes the increase, and so they devoted themselves to the ministry of the word and prayer.
3. Third, it should encourage us to thank God when we see the increase.
- There is no place for boasting.
 - It is not our sowing or our watering or our weed-pulling that causes the plants to grow.
 - These help to provide conditions for growth and health, but it is God who actually causes the growth...not us.
 - And what a grand thing it is to see life come up from the dirt.
 - The is the doing of the Lord and it is marvellous in our eyes.
 - It should warm our hearts with joy and with love toward Him.

TRANS> Thus you see how there is a lot of encouragement that comes from the fact that God causes the growth.

- But now I want to look another helpful aspect of this parable.

III. The stages of growth described in this parable give us hope.

A. As we hear of the blade, then the head, then the full grain in the head—we realise that it takes time for fruit to appear.

1. We should be greatly encouraged as soon as a soul is baptised.

- It is then that the little shoot becomes visible as a part of Christ's kingdom...
- Keep in mind that even the child who is not yet baptised may have life below the soil, and so may the adult who has not yet been to the water, like the thief on the cross.
 - But what I mean is, when they are baptised, their identification as a plant in the Lord's field is established.
- But we may look at that plant and we may say, "Where is the fruit?"
 - But we must not despair...
 - It takes time for fruit to grow.
 - Every oak tree was once an acorn.
 - Every great man was once a little baby.
 - Parents, elders, do not despair—take care of that plant, dig around it, weed around it, water it, and it will grow.
- And when you look at your own life.
 - You may not see much fruit yet—but are you resting in Christ alone for your salvation? Do you suppose that you have no need of His salvation? Are you trusting in your own works?
 - I tell you, if you are looking to Christ, you have much hope...
 - There may be stubborn sins that keep coming back on you—but again and again you repent... you know they are wrong and you confess and return to your Lord.
 - You may not have full assurance of faith, but if you are looking to Christ, you are forgiven and reconciled to God and soon the fruit will appear in your life.

2. And then there is that middle stage of growth.

- Now you have a strong profession of faith in the world—you are one who is serving the Lord...
 - who is a disciple that responds to His God's call.
 - Trials are borne, and the plant gets stronger as persecutions are endured. There is less fear to stand up for the Lord.
 - And you see a turning away from temptation—sin is being put off and righteousness is being put on.
- But still, is there the real fruit of the Spirit in your life—or are you just serving as a hired soldier does...
 - Is there a real love for the Lord?
 - Is there a true sense of His grace and salvation...

- a sense of the depravity of your own heart...
 - a true humility... or is it just one trying to prove himself or looking for greatness like Jesus' disciples were before they denied Him?
 - In this stage, there are often trials that seem to expose the worst in you.
 - David's adultery and Peter's denying of Christ...
 - You begin to see a heart that is far more selfish and proud than you ever realised.
 - You begin to see ugliness even in those things you once thought were virtues—but all of this only drives you to your Saviour.
 - You see your whining and your bitterness and your pettiness, your lack of true regard for others, your love of praise and the faithless selfishness of your worry and your fear and your depression.
 - And you cry out to Him for mercy!
 - Once again, do not despair.
 - This is a stage of true life in Christ.
 - All this is shaping you and molding you.
 - It is true that there are those who depart at this stage and show themselves to be false sons,
 - but just because there is no fruit that is clearly distinctive yet does not mean the fruit you do have is not true fruit.
 - Growth takes time—be patient and wait on the Lord.
3. And then there is the final stage... where the head clearly begins to bring forth fruit for the Lord.
- An assurance develops that was greater than it was before in your soul...
 - And a true love for Christ begins to animate your life.
 - Distinctive fruit is truly starting to show itself.
 - There is love for God and a joy in His salvation that was not known before.
 - Life is driven by love and gratitude more than duty and display.
 - A true heart of prayer, laced with thanksgiving, is showing itself.
 - There is a self-abandonment for the Lord—a desire to be spent for Him.
 - All of this fuelled by Christ and His Spirit—
 - You don't just say that it is fuelled by Christ, you know that it is.

TRANS> So you see how the seed develops—if you are in Christ, it will get there—just be patient. It comes by faith in Him.

B. So it is also with the worldwide kingdom—be patient—it will get there.

1. Sometimes it may seem like there is no hope—we are so small, so weak, so few...
 - but the kingdom is established upon Christ—it cannot fail. There is hope.
2. The church in this place and in that place needs to be purged—cut back from outward glory—humbled—chastened—brought into captivity at times—overrun by apostasy and heresy.
 - But always there is life in the plant and always there is growth.
 - And always that life will lead to the final stage when the harvest comes.

IV. And now let us consider the harvest.

- A. Here we are told of the sickle that immediately comes when the harvest is ready.
1. The sickle is often used as a warning that the Lord will come to judge and that when He does, the wicked will be cut down and cast into the fire.
 - For example, the words in our text are found in Joel where 3:13 where it says: **“Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Come, go down; for the winepress is full, the vats overflow—for their wickedness is great.”**
 - It is a passage of judgment when the wicked are ripe with wickedness.
 - The same is true when the sickle is mentioned in Revelation 14:17 where an angel comes forth with a sharp sickle, cuts down the vine, and throws it into the winepress of God’s wrath to be trampled.
 - There is a warning that the harvest day is coming and that after it does, it will be too late.
 - Once the reaper comes, there will be no more chance to get to Christ.
 - There will be no more fruit to bear.
 2. But in our passage, the harvest is presented from the opposite perspective...
 - Not that the reaper comes because wickedness has reached its apex...
 - But he comes with joy to gather in the fruit of the field.
 - The harvest of Christ is ready!
 - The Father is ready to gather them all and bring them into His house to be with Him forever.
 - The fruit that has been cultivated will be the fruit that we will have forever.
 - What we do here will count for all eternity... our labour in the Lord is not in vain.
 - What an incentive this is to lay up treasure in heaven.
 - What an incentive to seek the Lord in prayer for growth.
 - This world is very important because this is where we grow fruit for eternity.
 - Make the most of it by clinging to Christ until He comes.
 - Your day of harvest will come.
- B. We do not always understand why the Lord calls us home when He does.
1. He knows when our appointed time has come but He does not treat us all the same.
 - All in Christ will have some fruit, but some will have very little and others will have very much.
 - Some develop rich fruit very quickly, some very slowly... just like plants in the field.
 - Some have a great outward display which sometimes represents true growth—for example, Paul the apostle... but some have a great outward display that has more to do with their pride and desire to impress than real fruit.
 - Some have very little display of fruit in the world, but will be found to have very much fruit on the Day of Judgment...
 - Perhaps their fruit was hidden under a life filled with much suffering and sorrow out of which a rich love for God was cultivated beneath the surface...

- Perhaps there will children who perished in the womb who had a heart like John the Baptist that rejoiced in Christ, even from the womb...
- We do not know all the ways of God.
 - He is the Lord of the harvest and He will be the judge...
 - No doubt there will be many surprises.
- 2. But what we know is that the reaper will come...
 - First, for each of us personally... and then, when the kingdom is full, for the entire kingdom and all who are in the earth.
 - The judgment will reveal all.
 - See that in that day, you are found looking to Christ, the One who saves us from our sin and guilt and who gives us fruit.
- 3. My prayer is that when the sickle comes, it will be for each of you the day of your greatest joy and not the day of your deepest regret...
 - That you will be found in Christ, rejoicing in His grace and beauty and full of joy that the day of eternal service without sin has come.
 - Be sure that you are on the right trajectory...
 - A true blade that is on the way to developing a head that will one day be full of much fruit.
 - There is only way to be sure that you are on that trajectory.
 - It is by looking to Christ to save you.
 - It doesn't matter which stage you are at.
 - It matters that you are resting in Christ as your Saviour.

The harvest is coming.

- What a glorious happy day it will be for all who are in Christ!