

# Jesus Messiah: Seeing Christ In The Gospel Of Mark

*“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”  
(Mark 1:15 ESV)*

*And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said,  
“Truly this man was the Son of God!”  
(Mark 15:38–39 ESV)*

## **Parables Of The Kingdom**

**April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2017**

**Mark 4:21-34**

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### **Introduction:**

Good morning. I want to invite you to open your Bibles to Mark 4:21; that’s on page 839 in your pew Bibles. I mentioned last week that this cluster of parables was given by Jesus to answer the question: why are so many people responding in so many different ways to the ministry and message of Jesus? Why is it that every time Jesus says or does something people are responding in remarkably different ways – some people are falling down to worship him and other people are plotting to kill him – how does that happen? Why does that happen? What is going on here that we don’t see? That is the question that these parables collectively answer. We’ll read them and then we’ll try and remember what we learned last week about how to interpret parables in order to discuss what they appear to mean. Hear now the Word of the Lord:

And he said to them, “Is a lamp brought in to be put under a basket, or under a bed, and not on a stand? 22 For nothing is hidden except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret except to come to light. 23 If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.” 24 And he said to them, “Pay attention to what you hear: with the measure you use, it will be measured to you, and still more will be added to you. 25 For to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.”

26 And he said, “The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. 27 He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. 28 The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. 29 But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.”

30 And he said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? 31 It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, 32 yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.” (Mark 4:21–32 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

While it is true that these three parables represent an obvious unit in the text it might be helpful to deal with them one by one. Let's talk first about the parable of the lamp.

### **The Parable Of The Lamp:**

Now, we have to be careful with this one because most of us know this parable from the version that we find in Matthew. In Matthew's Gospel Jesus says:

A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 5:14–16 ESV)

That is the version of this saying that we are most familiar with – largely because they turned it into a song that we all learned in Sunday School – or at least you did if you are my age or older. “This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine....” That's a good song and it taught us this version of that parable – BUT – if you look closely this parable in Mark is NOT that parable. Jesus likely told this story 4 times a week as he preached from village to village and from time to time apparently he would change the odd detail to make a specific point. Remember that's how parables work! They reward the careful listener and the careful listener notices that there is a significant difference in how Jesus is telling this story in Mark 4. The point in Matthew's version is that WE NEED to shine the message of the Gospel to all around us. That is not the point in Mark's version. Listen carefully:

And he said to them, “Is a lamp brought in to be put under a basket, or under a bed, and not on a stand?  
(Mark 4:21 ESV)

In the Matthew version “people” are the subject. Listen carefully to Matthew: “do people light a lamp”. In the Mark version the lamp is the subject. Listen carefully. “Is a lamp brought in”. Now this is far more obvious in Greek than it is in English. In Greek the subject of a sentence has its own special ending so it is easier to see what the subject is in a Greek sentence and there is no doubt that in this version of the parable in Mark's Gospel Jesus is not talking about what WE do with the light, he is talking about the LIGHT ITSELF. This is a parable about Jesus as the light of

God. Now, last week I said that if you see anything in a parable that no one else see then check again – but we are on safe ground here – this is what careful readers see. So James Edwards for example says:

“Jesus is the lamp of God who has come to bring light and revelation.”<sup>1</sup>

William Lane says:

“Jesus was speaking of himself as the lamp that has been kindled and that has come”<sup>2</sup>

So, we’re on solid ground here; this is what careful readers see. This parable is about Jesus and it is saying that:

***Jesus is the light of God hidden in plain sight***

That’s the meaning of this parable in one sentence. Let me unpack that for you. The idea that Jesus is the light of God is not new to us if we are readers of the Bible. Jesus said that about himself in multiple places, he said for example:

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”  
(John 8:12 ESV)

So Jesus said, I am the way, sent from God, out of darkness and into his marvelous light. Jesus is the light of God! He is the way, the truth and the life. That’s the easy part.

But what does it mean to say that Jesus is the light of God “hidden in plain sight”? Look at verse 22:

For nothing is hidden except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret except to come to light.  
(Mark 4:22 ESV)

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<sup>1</sup> James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 139.

<sup>2</sup> William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1974), 165.

So Jesus says that this particular light – which is him – has been hidden so as to be found. What in the world does that mean? Well remember I said last Sunday that God hides things in places where only certain people look – that’s one of the most important things you need to know about God and it doesn’t matter that I said it, what matters is that Jesus said it. Jesus said:

“I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; 26 yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.” (Matthew 11:25–26 ESV)

According to Jesus God has designed a method of COSMIC SORTING. He has put the doggy door of the kingdom of God in such a place so as to found by certain people only. That is one of the most important things you need to know about God. He has POSITIONED LIGHT AND SALVATION so as to intentionally exclude arrogant and self-sufficient people. But it is very near to the broken hearted. It is very near to the poor in spirit. It is very near to those who mourn. It is very near to the pure of spirit – Jesus said that kind of thing again and again and again. He said this is how God wants it. This is how God DESIGNED IT – yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.

So, why are people responding to Jesus in such radically different ways? Because some people are not in a place where they can hear the message of the kingdom of God. They haven’t been knocked down. They are still standing tall and proud and WAY UP THERE ON THEIR GOD LIKE PERCH and they just can’t hear from there the still small voice of God. They can’t hear the voice of the Spirit saying: “Here is the path, walk ye in it”. And so they drift away while the meek and the broken and the humble and the contrite enter in. Farther in and further up – for this is the will of the Lord.

The second parable is often called:

### **The Parable Of The Growing Seed**

I mentioned last week that the word parable means “to cast alongside”. It means to use a very common story to help people understand a more complicated story. It is saying in essence “its like this” and that is basically the intro that Jesus uses for this parable. He says in verse 26:

“The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. (Mark 4:26 ESV)

Its like a man scattering seed, he says. Now that reminds us obviously of the parable of the sower but here the emphasis is on the process of growth. In the parable of the sower the emphasis was on the state of the soil – here we are zooming in on the good soil and this is what we see; (the farmer):

sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. 28 The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. 29 But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.” (Mark 4:27–29 ESV)

This parable is saying that:

***The Kingdom of God will grow slowly, surely and mysteriously towards a final harvest***

That’s the meaning of that parable in a single sentence. Again let me unpack that for you. The first idea is the most surprising – the idea that the kingdom will grow slowly. That was not expected; it was certainly not expected by John the Baptist. He said:

Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. (Matthew 3:10 ESV)

The axe is lying at the root of the tree! The end is nigh! Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand! John expected Jesus to bring immediate judgment and salvation – he did not see what we often refer to as the long delay. Jesus often spoke about a long delay for the simple reason that most of the Jews in his day expected a cataclysmic coming of the Kingdom of God. A lot Jesus teaching was given specifically to prepare people for a long delay. Luke 19 for example says:

As they heard these things, he proceeded to tell a parable, because he was near to Jerusalem, and because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately. (Luke 19:11 ESV)

Most people thought that Jesus was going to ride into Rome on a white horse and **THROW DOWN!** They expected the blood to flow to the horse’s bridle as Jesus slew the enemy’s of God’s people and established his righteous reign upon the earth. And instead, Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey and died on a cross. Clearly he is working a much longer plan than they had anticipated. And that’s the point that Jesus is making here. The Kingdom of God is going to arise **SLOWLY**.

But it is going to arise. It is going to happen as the Word of God is sown – the seed has power in and of itself – that’s what I mean by “surely”. The seed works – you can trust it to work. In fact Mark uses the Greek word *automatos* from which we get our English word “automatic”. The seed WORKS! It does its thing – the farmer doesn’t really understand what’s going on, he just knows that if he gets the good seed into the good soil than good things are gonna happen. That’s what he knows. He knows that the seed is powerful in and of itself.

I love how William Lane puts it, he says that the sowing of the seed or the preaching of the Word,

“unleashes mysterious forces which operate of themselves in the achievement of the sovereign purposes of God.”<sup>3</sup>

That statement resonates with me! Listen I am not a rocket scientist and I don’t think I’m the smartest guy in the world – but here is what I’ve figured out: the Word of God is MAGIC! Its MAGIC! It unleashes MYSTERIOUS FORCES which operate OF THEMSELVES in the achievement of the sovereign purposes of God. I believe that with all my heart! That is why I cannot get any steam for preaching anything other than the Word of God. I have some thoughts about stuff but I don’t CARE about my own thoughts and I am convinced that my thoughts about stuff will not change your life – no matter how creatively or dramatically those thoughts are expressed. But do you know what seems to just MAGICALLY EFFECT people? The word of God. My whole ministry is built upon this premise. I can ABOUT SOWING THE SEED OF THE WORD OF GOD. I just want to get it out – I don’t care how and I don’t care about anything else. If your program or your ministry is not about getting the word of God into ears and hearts than I just don’t care. Program is just a delivery vehicle for the Word of God. In the Bible I see all kinds of sowing. I see the Apostles preaching to large groups and I see them going house to house and so I want to do that. I want to scatter broadly and narrowly. I want to spread it out wide from the pulpit and then I want to throw it narrowly and directly right at your face – I want to both and then I want to go home and have a nap because at the end of the day – its not about me. Its about God and what he does with the seed that is sown.

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<sup>3</sup> William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1974), 169.

That's what the farmer does.

He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. (Mark 4:27 ESV)

He doesn't have a clue what's going on – he just knows that it works. That's my life in a nutshell. I don't have a clue why some sermons effect some people one way and other people another way. I don't have a clue how God gets people thinking and chewing over something that was said and how he uses that to change the whole course of a person's life and eternal destiny – I just know it happens. I just know that if I get the seed out there God is going to do something with it – for his glory and for somebody's everlasting good. And that's good enough for me.

The kingdom of God grows in such ways. Little by little, heart by heart, home by home. The seed gets in there – somehow, some way - and it grows. Slowly but surely in ways that cannot be explained. That's what this parable is saying.

The third parable is usually called:

### **The Parable Of The Mustard Seed**

Now as I mentioned last week, most of these parables involve imagery that would have been very familiar to Jesus' first century hearers. These were people who knew about fishing and farming – we probably don't know very much about those things so maybe a little background will be useful here. R.T. France helpfully explains that:

“The plant concerned is probably the black mustard, *Brassica nigra*, which was grown for oil as well as as a condiment. In good conditions it may grow to a height of 3 metres or even more, but its seed is extremely small (over 700 to a gramme) and was proverbial for something tiny, so that an annual growth rate of such height was remarkable. It is this contrast between an insignificant beginning and an impressive final size which is the point of the simile.”<sup>4</sup>

Now, maybe you appreciated that level of detail, maybe you didn't, but here's the point. This parable is teaching that:

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<sup>4</sup> R.T. France, *The Gospel Of Mark*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 216.

## *The Kingdom Of God arises from obscurity and insignificance*

That's the meaning of the parable in a single sentence.<sup>5</sup> Let me unpack that for you. Everything about Jesus SCREAMS obscurity at the start of the story. He is raised in Nazareth – a town so small and so insignificant it is not even mentioned in the Old Testament – did you know that? You would never even have heard of Nazareth if Jesus not been raised there. This was not Jerusalem, this was not Shiloh, this was not Bethel – those towns are all reasonably significant in the Old Testament – Nazareth is not even mentioned. Nothing interesting happens in Nazareth. Until it does. The obscurity of Nazareth had actually become a proverb in Jesus's day – when Philip went and told Nathanael that he had found the One spoken of in Scripture and that he was from Nazareth, Nathanael said:

“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” (John 1:46 ESV)

Come and see! Remember God hides things in places where only certain people will look. If you are looking for a **WORLDLY** Messiah – a **POLITICAL MESSIAH** - then you will look in Jerusalem but if you are looking for a Suffering Savior then you will consider Jesus of Nazareth, after all the Scriptures say:

1 Who has believed what he has heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?  
2 For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.  
3 He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.  
4 Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.  
5 But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. (Isaiah 53:1–5 ESV)

Its not like God hid Jesus hoping no one would find him – **HE TOLD PEOPLE WHERE TO LOOK!** He said: “Look for a person who has no form or majesty. Don't look in palaces! Look for someone despised and rejected – a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief – as one from whom men hide their faces!” Look where most people look away. Look there and you will find him.

And they did. They found him in Nazareth – a most unusual place. A place they would never have thought to look until God directed their eyes to see. And then out of obscurity the things of

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<sup>5</sup> This sentence has been borrowed wholesale from James Edwards, page 145.



God begin to grow and grow and grow. The Kingdom of God begins in a town that no one has ever heard of but it doesn't end there. It grows and grows and grows and in the end it is the greatest thing on earth. Large enough for the birds of the air to nest in its shade.

Now, if you are a Bible reader you recognize that phrase. It comes from Daniel 4 and the dream of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar had a dream about his kingdom and in that dream his kingdom was compared to a mighty tree.

The tree grew and became strong, and its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth. 12 Its leaves were beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in it was food for all. The beasts of the field found shade under it, and **the birds of the heavens lived in its branches**, and all flesh was fed from it. (Daniel 4:11–12 ESV)

Do you see what Jesus is saying? He is saying that the Kingdom of God is going to be so great at the end that the greatest empires in human history could rest like little birds in its shade. Most commentators understand this as a prophesy of largeness but also of inclusiveness, meaning that the birds represent the nations of the earth – they represent people from every tribe, tongue and human empire being included in the kingdom of God. So this parable is prophesying that in the end – though it began very small – the kingdom of God will be BIG and it will be WIDE – thanks be to God; that's what this parable means.

### **The Plan Suggested By The Parables:**

Now as always we want to end by asking some version of the question: how then shall we live? If we are Christians we want to be MORE THAN JUST HEARERS of the word – we want to be doers of the Word – we want to live in light of what we've heard. So I want to end by looking at the plan that it seems to me flows naturally from these parables. Its not a complicated plan, I think it is very simple. If all of what we've heard is true – if its true that Jesus is the light of God – that he is the doggy door to heaven – that he is the way, the truth and the life – and if its true that people are drawn into and through that tiny door by HEARING the Word of God and if it is true that people can't hear unless they are brought low and unless someone preaches to them – and if its true that the kingdom will start small and end really big then I think there is a plan that we should pursue as God's people and that plan is this.

I think we should pray, sow, sleep and arise – and repeat as necessary until we die or Jesus comes

again. I think that's the plan! I think we should pray because if God doesn't humble our friends and loved ones – if he doesn't knock them down and shatter their idols then they will never be in the place to hear the still small voice of God. So we have to pray.

And we have to sow. We have to get the Word out there! We have to speak the Word in season and out of season – when people ask for it and when they don't. From pulpits and on Facebook. In person and by note and letter – by any means and every means – by all means let us **SPREAD THE WORD!**

And then, let us sleep. Let us **REST** in the Sovereignty of God. Let us **NEVER** think that we can argue people into the kingdom or convince people into the kingdom. We are not God – we are not in charge of outcomes – we are in charge of sowing. So we sow and then we sleep. Sleeping is a sacrament for all those who sow the word. It reminds you that there is **WAY MORE GOING ON HERE** than the parts that have to do with you. So just do your bit and then have a nap. Rest in the work of God.

And repeat as necessary. If you wake up tomorrow it means that you're not dead and it means that Jesus has not returned. Therefore, go back to work. Go back into the field – go back into the world and **SOW YOUR SEED**. Open your mouth and speak to the world about Jesus.

Pray. Sow. Sleep. Arise. And repeat as necessary.

That's what the farmer did – and that's what we should do – because this is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God, let's pray together.