

Growth is a given

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[0 : 0 0] Now, if we turn to Mark chapter 4, there are two parables, and the way we're going to do things this evening is a little bit different in that we're going to consider one of the parables and then pause, sing a psalm of praise to God, and then turn to the second parable.

The parables are related, but they are distinct parables, and perhaps doing it in that way will emphasize the fact that they are indeed distinct parables, each with their own particular lessons to teach us. So we'll begin by looking at the first parable, a few words of introduction really to both of them, and then proceeding to consider this first parable, the parable of the growing seed. Both parables have to do with growth, and the question of growth is one that is of interest to us as Christians, as churches. Many books are written on the matter of church growth.

Do churches grow? How do churches grow? Is our church, is our congregation a growing church, a growing congregation? Is there a formula or a master plan or a strategy that can secure growth?

We want to see growth. We want to see growth. And yet, how does that happen? What can we do? Is there anything we can do to secure the growth that we would like to see? These are questions that occupy our mind and attention. Then, of course, there's the bigger picture that goes beyond our own congregation, the bigger picture of the worldwide cause of Christ, the church of Jesus Christ all over the world.

Is it a growing church? Should we expect the church to grow? Jesus tackles the matter of growth in two parables that concern seeds, or in the case of the second parable, one seed. And he compares the kingdom of God to seeds, or a seed, where the common thread in both parables is that growth is a given.

[2 : 2 6] Jesus doesn't see any need to argue the case, to persuade his audience. It's a given that the seed will grow. That is taken as a given. It doesn't need to be argued. And that may seem a very obvious thing to say. I think it is worth pausing and noting that that is indeed a given. The kingdom of God is a growing kingdom. It's in the very nature of the kingdom that it grows. Jesus did not conceive of the possibility that it would do anything other than grow. Now, it will grow in the manner that he determines it will grow in the time and at the pace that he determines, but it will grow. It can do no other but grow. We want to think about both of these parables. And in both cases, so there are different parables, the approach we'll use is the same. And what we're going to do is we're going to distinguish between what I'm calling the big picture, the big picture of God's redemptive mission in and through Jesus that is hinted at or spoken of by the parables, but also the little picture of our part, of your part and my part in that same redemptive mission of God in and through Jesus.

These aren't two ways, really. They're not two different ways of seeking to draw truth and principles from the parable, but simply distinguishing between these principles as they apply to the big picture and also very practically to the little picture of your life and my life and our need to serve God and to do what he would have us do. The little picture is important. It's where we fit in.

It's where our responsibility lies. But in the absence of a sense or a vision of the big picture, it can sometimes be difficult, sometimes discouraging to play our part in the little picture.

So let's think, first of all, of the first parable, the parable of the growing seed. And we'll begin there with thinking and identifying the big picture. But what is it? The big picture is all about God's mission in and through Jesus. Jesus, by his life, death, and resurrection, has sown the seed of the kingdom. And the seed that he has sown will result in a harvest. A man scatters seed in the ground.

Then he allows the seed to grow in due course, and there is a harvest. The harvest is guaranteed. There will be a harvest. Not because of anything the man does, but because God secures the harvest. And that is true of Jesus and his mission. The seed is sown and the harvest will be produced. It will come.

[5 : 45] Jesus himself saw some of the harvest in his own day. We live in an age of gospel privilege, where we see the harvest being reaped all over the world on a scale that perhaps no previous generation has witnessed. But I think also that the language of the harvest, again, as we think of the the big picture, the language of the harvest points to the end times. Often in the Bible, the harvest does point us in that direction. It points us forward to the end times. The day when the harvest is fully gathered and the king returns to usher in the new heavens and the new earth. And all of that will happen.

The seed has been sown. It will result in this great God-given harvest. And what this parable especially stresses is that the growth of the kingdom is God's work.

The picture is a very vivid one of the farmer who sows, and then he leaves God to do what God does and produce the harvest. That's the emphasis. And also the emphasis is on the fact that this harvest is secured in God's time. It's not the farmer who determines the time. God determines the time when the seed will blossom, when each part will produce in the manner intended.

But moving on from that, and of course as we look at the big picture and the little picture, there's considerable overlap. But if we turn to the little picture and consider the part that we play in the growth of the kingdom, I think we can do this by distinguishing between what we do, what we are called to do, and what God does in this matter of kingdom growth. What do we do? Well, looking at the parable, I think we can identify three activities in the language of the parable, which then in turn we'll think about what they mean. But three activities that we can identify. We sow, we sleep, and we sickle. I don't know if sickle is a verb, but it seemed a shame not to use it. So we sow, we sleep, and we sickle. Let's think of each of these activities in turn. Remembering this is what we do. We'll come to consider what God does, but this is what we have to do. First of all, we sow.

Now given what we said about the big picture, there is a sense in which Jesus has already sown the seed in his life, in his mission, in all that he has done to secure the kingdom and guarantee its ultimate consummation and the ultimate harvest. But we, to use a term that I think we coined last week when we were thinking about the parable of the sower, we as under farmers, we continue to sow the word, to sow the word, to proclaim the good news concerning Jesus. That's what we have to do.

[8 : 49] We have to sow. We'll think a little bit about how we are to do that in a moment. But let's just move on to the other or the next thing that we need to do. And it's perhaps a little bit surprising, but using the language of the parable, we sow and then we sleep. Now I'm particularly drawn to this as being our responsibility. Not only do we sow, but we sleep. Now the contrast between sowing and sleeping in the original is really quite striking. Whether it's deliberate or not, I don't know, but it's striking. The word order in Greek for that part of the parable, there in Mark chapter 4 from verse 25, verse 26, and the second part of it where it says a man scatters seed. Something along this line, is that the man sows and sleeps and rises night and day. That's the order. It's been rearranged in translation as often is necessary and legitimate. But that is what it says, the man sows and sleeps.

And I'm drawn to that little expression, he sows and sleeps. He sows and having sown, that's, well, he can go to sleep. He can go to bed. He's done his part. He doesn't need to do more. He's done what he has to do. He's sown and he can sleep. I think the message is clear for us. Having sown the word, having declared, having proclaimed the good news, having sown, we have done all that we can do and all that we're called to do. And so we can sleep. We can sleep resting in the knowledge that God will honor our service and obedience that God will take and use the seed that has been sown.

We don't need to fret or stress or worry. We sleep. We sow and we sleep. Now, this pattern or principle is particularly applicable to the task of gospel proclamation.

That's the concern, I think, of this parable, certainly as we see it in the measure that it applies to us. But I think we can, and let me just do this, I think we can expand it beyond the immediate application of preaching the word, proclaiming the word, making known the good news of the gospel, and leaving the matter in God's hands, to do as he sees fit to do. We can expand it really to everything that we do. God would have us, he would have you do what he requires you to do, what is your duty to do. And having done that, then you leave the matter in his hands. Let me just give an example of that that I was struck by, even this morning. I was probably struck by it because this thought was in my head in the light of this evening. But I was speaking to a member of the congregation this morning who's job hunting. And so I asked him, you know, how are things going? Any success? Any news on the jobs front? And the manner in which he responded was something along these lines,

I don't know if it was word perfect, but something along these lines. He said, oh yes, well I've just handed in an application and a CV, and well now I leave it in God's hands.

[12 : 27] It's really the same principle. That's, what more can he do? He has to do what he has to do. He can't sit back and just wait for people to come looking for him. He has to diligently and carefully seek out employment, but having done what he can do, he has to leave it in God's hands.

And that is true of so many things in life. And I wonder if often we don't do that, and so we don't sleep. We're fretting, and we're worrying, and we're concerned, and we're seeking to go beyond what God would have us do.

And we end up stressed out and not able sometimes to sleep when that is what we're called to do. The farmer sows and sleeps. Of course, this particularly applies to the matter to hand, in proclaiming the gospel and sowing the seed. But I think we can draw out the principle beyond that to so much of life. Along these same lines, as I was thinking about this, I was reminded, the thought came to my mind of the words of Jesus concerning Mary, when Martha was fretting, trying to provide, be hospitable in so many ways, and Mary was at the feet of Jesus.

Actually, that's not true. That wasn't the occasion. It was when Jesus was anointed, his feet were anointed by Mary. And Jesus said these words of Mary, she did what she could.

Simple words. She did what she could. Nothing more was demanded, and nothing more was required. That's true of us as well. We are to do what we can. We are to do what we're called to do. Not more, not less either, but not more. So we sow, we sleep, and then we sickle. Again, I'm not sure if it's a verb or not, but having sown and having slept, we then, as God grants the growth, and we'll come in a moment to that part that God plays, we also have a responsibility to bring in the harvest.

[14 : 35] The farmer sows, then he sleeps. He can't do anything more until the crop is there in the field, and then he goes out. He retakes his duties, as it were, to bring in the harvest.

I think there's a lesson there for us as well in terms of what our responsibility is. We don't just preach the word and then do nothing. We sleep trusting that God will increase, will bring the increase, use the seed that has been sown, produce the growth. But then when he does, we need to be able and willing and prepared to provide a place for those God brings into his church. We need to ensure that our congregation is a place of welcome and nurture for all those that God draws into his kingdom. That's what we do. What about God? What's God doing? What does he do in the light of this parable? Well, his great task, central to the matter to hand, is that he is the one who gives life.

He is the one who produces growth. In the language of the parable, well, the farmer doesn't even know how the seed grows. That's what it says there in verse 27. Night and day, whether he sleeps or get up or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself, the soil produces corn and then it goes on. The seed contains within itself a power of generation and growth. This is true of the word of God. It contains as it is applied by the Holy Spirit, a power within itself to transform and to renew. Do we believe that? Do we believe that the unadorned gospel has the power to convert and to transform, to bring growth? As I was thinking of the power of the word to convert men and women, the story that came to my mind was of a cousin who married a young man from Israel. This was a long time ago, maybe 30 years ago. Mickey was his name. He wasn't a Christian. When they came over or came back to Scotland, he was staying with my aunt and uncle until they sorted out their own accommodation, got married, and so on and so forth. My aunt and uncle, in the circumstances, realized that there probably wouldn't be much merit in preaching to this young man, that that maybe wasn't something that would be well received. But what they did do is they left a Bible by the side of his bed in the guest room where he was being provided with accommodation.

The Bible was simply sitting there, just a Bible. You wonder, well, what's going to happen? It's just a Bible. He won't even understand it probably. It's so complicated and he's got no background.

And he was, I wouldn't say a secular Jew, but certainly a non-religious Jew. One day, I don't know how many days had passed, one day he came down for breakfast and declared, he said, I've been reading the Bible and Jesus is the Messiah.

[18 : 08] It was like, you know, you could have knocked my uncle and aunt down with a feather. You think, well, where did that come from? It came from reading the Word of God.

The unadorned Word of God has the power to transform, to convert, to bring new life where there is no life.

So we sow, we sleep, and God gives the growth, and then we bring in the harvest. Now, as we're acknowledging this, we're acknowledging that our task is to sow and then we leave it in God's hands, I think there is a danger of using the parable or the principles that it establishes as an excuse.

It ought not to be, but it could be used perhaps as an excuse for a passive or thoughtless or Christian presentation of the gospel message. Well, I've preached the Word, and well, if anything happens, well, that's not my problem.

It's not my responsibility. If nobody's converted or the church doesn't grow, it's not my problem. I faithfully preach the gospel. And it may sound very pious, but actually it is a recognition that the sowing isn't being done as it ought to be done.

[19 : 29] And any lack of growth is simply being blamed, as it were, on God choosing not to grant that growth. It is, of course, true that only God can give life and growth, but we need to sow passionately and creatively and assiduously.

That is our responsibility. I guess on the other side, it is helpful to be reminded by this parable and by the principles that it presents that we perhaps should be a little wary of imagining that growth can be manufactured by strategies and timetables and programs that are presented to us as the latest thing that will secure church growth.

I'm not suggesting that there's not merit in considering a better way of doing things, a more creative way of presenting the Word, of capturing people's attention, and so on and so forth.

But we take it all with a degree of caution in acknowledging that ultimately it is God who grants the growth.

Of course, the other thing that we do, I suppose it's another part of the task, though it's not explicit in the parable. You might argue it's implicit. And that is, given that it is God who grants the growth, we do need to pray.

[20 : 58] We pray to God that He would grant that growth. In a way, that is tied in with sleeping. Sleeping in the sense of trusting. Trusting in God and that trust being reflected in our coming to Him and asking Him to grant that growth.

So in this matter of the growth of the kingdom of God, we have a job to do. You have a job to do. We all have a job to do. We have to sow. Having sown, we sleep trusting in God.

And then, as God grants the growth, so we bring in the harvest. Well, let's pause there. Let's sing a psalm that speaks of this hope and this confidence that we have that God is indeed the one who honors the sowing of His servants.

Psalm 126 on page 171. Psalm 126. There on page 171.

We'll sing the whole of the psalm. Now, if you weren't paying attention at the start when I explained how I was going to do things, you're thinking, yeah, service is over. But it's not. Okay. So let's stand and sing Psalm 126.

[22 : 09] When Zion's fortunes God restored, it was a dream come true. When Zion's fortunes God restored, it was a dream come true.

As we're living with laughter filled, our tongues with songs anew.

The nation said, the Lord has done great things for Israel.

The Lord gave mighty things for us and joined our hearts new well.

Restore our fortunes, gracious Lord, like streams in deserts are.

[23 : 26] A joyful harvest will reward the weeping sower's part.

The man who bearing sick to sow goes out with tears of grief.

Will come again with songs of joy bearing his harvest sheaf.

Second parable. The parable of the mustard seeds. A similar theme, but with a slightly different emphasis.

And again, looking at it in the same way that we did the previous one, thinking of the big picture, then moving on to the little pictures where we fit in. First of all, the big picture. Well, what is it?

[24 : 26] Well, it's really the same as the big picture in the first parable, but with one or two additions. It is about God's mission in and through Jesus. Jesus, by his life, death, and resurrection, has sown the seed of the kingdom.

In a way, that's more, you might say it's even clearer here in the sense that it is just the one seed. And from this one seed is produced all that is produced.

And that, in a sense, ties in a little bit more with seeing this as a parable that speaks of the mission of Jesus in sowing this one seed that produces this great bush, the largest of the garden plants as it's described in the parable.

But in addition to that common theme in terms of the big picture, there are a couple of additional elements not present in the previous parable, certainly not so clearly.

Firstly, there's the focus on the contrast between the minuscule size of the seed and the large size of the resulting bush. That's really at the heart of this parable.

[25 : 34] We don't have that in the previous one. The previous one is about how God makes the seed grow, and he does so in his own time. But here the contrast is between this tiny seed and the resulting outcome of this great bush.

That's one particular emphasis that we have in this parable. The kingdom of God arises from seeming obscurity and insignificance.

Of course, that was true of Jesus himself. In the eyes of the world, Jesus was no more than an insignificant, insignificant, inconspicuous seed of whom nothing much could be expected.

But in Jesus, God has sown a seed that will result in a great harvest. And the focus on that great harvest also introduces here in this parable an element that perhaps wasn't found in the first to the same extent.

Now, this parable introduces the attractive picture of the birds finding sucker and shade in the bush that grows from the tiny seed.

[26 : 45] There in verse 32, Yet when planted, the seed, though so small it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade.

And I want to think a little bit about that picture being painted of the birds of the air finding shelter in this bush that has grown.

We do need to be a little bit careful in not drawing out something that's not there or not intended to be there. But it does seem to me that in this language that we find in the telling of this parable, there's an echo of an Old Testament picture that foresaw the Messianic kingdom as being a home for the nations of the world.

We read there in Ezekiel chapter 17, and it speaks of the sprig that God takes and plants, and it seems so insignificant, and yet it grows into a tree that extends beyond others.

It seemed much more promising. But also that in the branches of that tree, you know, the nations would find shelter and succor. And I think certainly that picture is one that we find in the parable, and it's possible that Jesus has this in mind as he uses this language.

[28 : 12] This is the big picture then, the seed that has been sown, the bush that will grow and provide shelter for the nations.

And it's important to keep our eye on that big picture. The tree is growing, it will grow, it is providing and will provide shelter for all those whom God draws to himself from the nations of the world.

It is happening now, and it will continue. But then if we move to the little picture, how we fit in, what we have to do in the light of this parable, I think we can legitimately speak of the challenge to us to sow our little seed.

You could argue that, well, the parable speaks of a seed that has been sown. Well, that's a done deal. It's been sown. But I don't think it's unfair or unreasonable to draw from it that we too, in a subordinate way, if you wish, can and must sow our little seed.

And I think in this sense, we can draw it a little bit more, not simply sowing the seed of the word, but a word that we speak that may be concerning Jesus, sharing the good news.

[29 : 34] It may be a word of encouragement, a word of counsel to one in need of encouragement or counsel. It could be an unseen act of kindness performed to a fellow believer or to somebody who is not a Christian.

And we could draw up a long list of tiny little things. I think the parable reminds us that the things that we say and do, though they may seem to us, maybe to others, to be insignificant, yet they can have eternal significance as God uses them in the extending of His kingdom and the building of His church.

As we maybe enter into the realms of speculation somewhat, I can imagine that one of the exciting things about heaven will be looking back and seeing the big picture from that perspective of how that word, how that act that seems so insignificant was used of God for eternal profit.

We sow our little seed. But then we stand back and we observe in patient and joyful awe. I'm drawing here on this contrast that the parable very much stresses on the contrast between this tiny seed and the great bush, the great plant that results from it.

And again, really the one who plants the seed has little to do with that, but there's the excitement of seeing what happens, of being struck by the contrast.

[31 : 15] And that's what we can do as we see the kingdom growing, as we can see what God is doing, and we stand back and we rejoice in it.

I speak of joyful awe, but also of patient joyful awe, because sometimes the time that it takes can be a very long time. If we think of the little seeds that we sow, time can pass, months, years, perhaps sometimes we'll never see.

And so there's a patient and joyful observation of what God is doing. But then also we enjoy and we provide shade.

If we think of this picture of the parable of the plant providing in its branches for the birds of the air perching in its shade, if we are right in detecting the picture of the birds of the air finding shelter, a prophetic anticipation of the ingathering of the nations, then we have our part to play in that.

In one sense, we play our part simply by enjoying the provision that God makes, because we are the nations. We are the Gentiles who have been gathered in, and we take our place.

[32 : 30] We enjoy the shelter. We profit from what God has provided for our nurture and the home that he has provided in his church. So in that way, we play our part.

But we also can play our part by ensuring that our congregation, this congregation, is a place of refuge and shelter and nurture for men and women and boys and girls from all the nations of the world.

Just like the plant that grow from this tiny seed provided shelter for the birds of the air. That's what we do. But what does God do?

Well, here, really, there's very little difference to what we saw in the first parable. He is the one who gives life and growth. Without God's action, the seed will lie dormant and impotent, but as God, by His Spirit, works in hearts and lives, the green shoots of life and growth begin to appear and soon grow into this great plant that amazes those who see it given its humble beginnings.

Well, let's draw things to a close as we kind of consider the two parables now in conclusion. Perhaps going back to the questions that we posed at the very beginning.

[33 : 47] Are we a growing church? In the parables, Jesus sees growth as a given. If we're not growing, well, we can be sure that the reason is not to be found in God's unwillingness or inability to grant growth, nor is it to be found in the power of the Word to convert and renew.

That is a power that remains as it has ever been. Perhaps what we do need to do is to examine the manner in which we are sowing, the manner in which we are praying and sleeping and trusting in God, the manner in which we are providing a home for those whom God brings to Himself.

Those are the kind of questions perhaps we need to take away and ponder on for ourselves. Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word.

We thank You for Your Kingdom. We thank You for the manner in which it has been brought into reality and established in and through the person of Your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ.

We thank You for the confidence that we can have that Your purposes are being and will be fulfilled and there is none who can stand in the way of the fulfilling of Your purposes.

[35 : 12] And we thank You that in that great big picture we have our own part to play. However seemingly insignificant it might appear to us and to others, and yet as we do what You would have us do so we can be sure that You come alongside and accompany and grant to our efforts the result and the fruit and the harvest that You have determined for them.

And we pray all of these things in Jesus' name. Amen.