

The Surprising Growth of the Secret Kingdom

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning, everyone. We're continuing our series in the Gospel of Mark. If you've got your Bible, keep it open there, Mark chapter 4. You know, it's interesting, you know, these long readings that we have in the Bible, and then Jesus is speaking here in this text, and you know, the one thing, if God spends a lot of time speaking, and if Jesus spends a lot of time speaking, we need to spend, one of the most important things we can do as Christians, is spend a lot of time listening, listening, listening.

So, I wonder if you've ever been in a situation where listening to instructions given to you is of the utmost importance. We don't often have that in our daily lives. You know, you wake up, do your thing, do your thing.

Maybe it depends on the job you've got. Michael, you in the chemical industry, I'm assuming you've got to listen to instructions pretty carefully, otherwise, you know, bad things can happen. But, like, for in our lives, maybe you've been bungee jumping, and you tie the cord on properly and just make sure everything is done properly.

Anyone been parachuting or paragliding? You listen very carefully to the instructions that are given to you. Don't just jump in and go for it. Maybe mountain climbing, or shark cage diving, or any fun or adventurous activity.

I once went to the shooting range for when I wasn't serving in the army, but we nonetheless went shooting one day in the army range, and the number one rule, there's a bunch of rules, but you don't walk onto the firing range.

[1 : 3 1] There's a line that you just don't cross. Anyway, one guy didn't listen. He just walked onto the firing range. Well, he was lucky to make it out alive, but when he got back to where the army sergeants were, they nearly left him dead, because he just wasn't listening.

And so you put your life in danger at certain times when you need to listen well. And our passage today is all about listening well, because lives are at risk. Now, the phrase, the kingdom of God has arrived, remember Jesus saying that?

The kingdom of God is at hand. And he would have said it like, the kingdom of God is at hand. Now, listen to our parable today. Listen!

This kingdom of God thing is a declaration of war. Remember last week? Invasion. Invasion is happening. When Jesus arrives, there's an invasion that starts happening in the world.

With the arrival of Jesus in Galilee, the cosmic war for the soul of the world has begun in earnest. That's why you get all these different reactions to Jesus. The kingdom of God is in the process of invading the world and carrying out the forces of evil and darkness that are opposed to it.

[2 : 4 3] The time has finally arrived. 2,000 years ago, when Jesus arrived in Galilee, for God to take decisive action to fix the problems that Satan started, or that Satan and sin unleashed in the world in Genesis 3.

At the time of Jesus, that would have been 4,000 years ago. Finally, the time has arrived. The liberation of the world is at hand.

And in this section, in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus gets down to sort of brass tacks to explain exactly how the kingdom is going to do this. It's the blueprint for the plan of invasion.

There's a number of surprises in store for us in this section about how that blueprint for the kingdom is going to work. And perhaps the first surprise is that Jesus just starts talking about farming.

So this great kingdom that's about to arrive that's going to change the world is all about popping seeds into the ground.

[3 : 49] You're like, oh, it's a strange way for a kingdom to take over the world. So you're immediately like, oh, maybe I need to listen to this and see what's going on here. The first surprise is that God's kingdom will be a secret or a hidden kingdom or the invasion is going to be a sort of hidden invasion.

It's not going to be obvious and open for everyone. God's kingdom is going to be a kingdom that is hidden from the sight of its enemies. Now, there's a few ways to invade enemy territory.

You can come in with all guns blazing. You can mobilize your entire force, come in like a rolling thunder. Whatever the enemy has, you build bigger and better in order to beat him.

That's one way to invade and people do that all the time. Here, Jesus takes a different tack. His invasion is going to come by stealth. It's more like a special forces operation.

It's going to come in undetected, sort of under the radar type of stuff. It's going to lie hidden and dormant for some time. But then at just the right time, moments in history, it will explode out of obscurity and be revealed as this glorious, world-changing empire.

[5 : 01] Now, to see how surprising this is, just check the context, the first few verses. Again, Jesus began to, from Mark chapter 4, again, Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out in the lake while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge.

There are these huge crowds following Jesus and for good reason. They've seen and heard what he can do. Up to 9 Mark, in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is exercising demons in the synagogue, healing people in the synagogue, and the huge crowds are coming to see him and see what's going on.

The crowds are primed and ready. All Jesus has to do is say the word and he will have an army at his back. Now, if Jesus was an ordinary person, he would play to the crowd.

He would give a rousing speech about loyalty to God and country. For those of us who, my older generation, do you remember the movie Patton?

George C. Scott, General Patton, giving that famous speech in front of the American flag. A rousing speech. You want to take up arms and fight. Instead, Jesus gives an incomprehensible story about farming.

[6 : 24] Judging by the standards of the world, Jesus totally blows it. You can just see his disciples looking at each other in utter consternation. Hey, we've got the crowds here. Jesus is talking about the kingdom. Let's go.

And he's about farming. And Jesus, you're losing the crowd, buddy. Like, let's get this thing back on track over here. What's he doing? He's losing it. Oh, they've got no clue what's going on and they need him to explain it to them.

Let's have a look at verse 10. When he was alone, the twelve, that's the disciples, the twelve disciples that we've just met in the earlier chapter, and the others around him asked him about the parables.

Like, Jesus, what, you know. It's interesting, we're so used to the parable of the sower, we almost automatically know what it means. But if you, the crowd listening, you don't know what you're expecting.

Miracles, I don't know, an exorcism, or some major word. And, Jesus doesn't even say what the parable, he doesn't even say it's about the kingdom of God. We know it's about the kingdom of God because we've read the gospel of Mark and it's sort of part of our heritage, the gospel of the sower, the parable of the sower.

[7 : 34] But notice in verse 3, Jesus just starts, listen, a farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, the birds came and ate up, some fell on rocky places, didn't have much soil, sprang up quickly, the soil was, you know, he doesn't even tell you what it's about.

It's okay. Is this kind of farmer I thought he was a king? Is this kingdom coming? Or maybe he's a farmer. Maybe we just need to go and learn how to farm better. Maybe, you know, how, they're going to bring the kingdom. But this is where we see the genius of mind of God revealed or at work.

You see, when you communicate a plan of invasion, you don't make it comprehensible to the enemy. That's just dumb. You have to speak in code so that they don't understand.

Otherwise, they know what you're going to do and they're going to take countermeasures to neutralize your attack or to attack you back. They can ambush you. And this is actually, strangely, surprisingly, what the parables are designed to do.

They're information that reveals truths about how the kingdom will work to those on the inside, but the parables obscure that information to those on the outside.

[8 : 46] They kind of work like the Enigma machine of World War II, that code-breaking machine or the machine that set up the codes and then they broke it in order to find out what the Germans were communicating. Now, what you need when you've got a code, you need a cipher, a key, the thing that unlocks the meaning in order to make, in order to understand what's going on.

And in order to make sense of the parables and therefore the message of the kingdom, you need this key. You need the key to understand what's going on.

And Jesus, as we find out, will be that key. The fact that the kingdom of God is a secret and there's something that God wants hidden is a bit of a surprise to us.

We don't often think of the kingdom like that. But that's exactly what Jesus says in verse 11 and 12. So they come to him and ask him for it. What's this parable about?

He says, well, the secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you, meaning to the people that have now come and asked him, not to the crowds, to the twelve and those with him that came to Jesus and asked him.

[9 : 54] the secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to those on the outside everything is said in parables, so that, and then there's a strange saying, they may be ever seeing but never perceiving and ever hearing but never understanding.

Otherwise, they might turn and be forgiven. Before we deal with that, just notice you've got two groups. The insiders, at this point the disciples and those who want to know more about Jesus or to know more about what Jesus is talking about and the outsiders.

It doesn't say who they are but by implication those who are happy to stay baffled or at least weren't inclined to find out more. So some came with the disciples to say, oh, really interesting to know what Jesus is saying and others were like, well, I thought we were going to get a miracle.

When are we going to get a miracle? Or when is he going to say something that I understand? This is too much hard work. The insiders are given secret knowledge about the kingdom and how it works and the outsiders are left, well, kind of clueless.

The clue to this, the clue to why this is is that they just can't be bothered. Do you remember that TV series, Am I Bothered? It's one of the most irritating things on planet earth.

[11 : 16] Catherine Tate, the English comedian. Am I bothered? Well, nah. They're just not bothered. Otherwise, I'd go and check out what Jesus is talking about. They just don't have the time.

They just don't think Jesus is worth listening to. And so one of the keys that unlock the kingdom, yes, Jesus is the key, but listening to his, what he says about the kingdom is the key that unlocks the secret to the kingdom and the parables.

Ongoing, attentive listening to Jesus is the key to understanding the kingdom of God. Now, the parable itself is not so much about the sower as it is about what happens to the seed once it enters into various environments.

And the key to the different way that the seed reacts is dependent on how people listen to the message. So let's look at the various elements of this parable to see if we can understand it better.

Notice in Jesus' explanation of the parable how often the word hear or listen occurs. It's all over this text. If you had a red pen or something, you'd see it all over.

[12 : 28] Verse 15, verse 16, verse 17, and verse 20. Verse 15, some people are like seed along the path where the word is sown.

as soon as they hear it. Now, hear and listen is the same word. I know in English it's not the same word, obviously, and we've got the saying of, yeah, you're hearing but you're not listening.

It's kind of like that with this parable. You're hearing but you're not really listening. But the Greek has got one word. Hear and listen is the same thing. Verse 16, others, like seed sown in rocky places, hear the word.

at once and receive with joy but we know what happens to them. And so on it goes. A lot of hearing and listening. And of course, Jesus starts this whole parable by listen.

And then he ends it with those who have ears to hear must hear. Those who have ears to listen must listen. Okay, so one of the main things we've got to do when Jesus is talking about anything really but hear specifically about the kingdom is listen well.

[13 : 38] You know how President Jesus said he must listen properly. Okay, that's what we've got to do with Jesus. What's interesting is that the first few hearings or listenings don't seem to work very well.

The first few listenings don't seem to go very well. Jesus tells people to listen and like people just don't. The seed that falls on the path is snatched up before it can even penetrate.

That's the point about the path. The path is compacted. It's a road. It's a tarmac. I know some plants mostly weeds can grow in tarmac. Grass can grow in tarmac. It's incredible. But it doesn't grow very well.

It's not like you get grass lawns on tarmac with the whole point about a path. You can't grow anything there. There's zero going, zero hearing going on with the person who is, with the seed that gets thrown onto the path.

It's fallen on deaf ears. You know the saying, in one ear and out the other? Well, that first hearing doesn't even go in one ear.

[14 : 40] It just bounces off. Paching! The seed that falls on rocky soil falls on soil that has no real depth to it. When troubles come, the person who has heard it, who's heard this word, who's received the seed and the seed is the word, it's a message.

In this context, it's the message about Jesus. It's the message about the kingdom. Falls onto rocky soil, no depth. When trouble comes, the person who's heard it falters and falls back into their old ways.

The Greek word there is scandalized. It causes an offense to the person who has received it and he would rather live a life of comfort than face any hardship because of following Jesus.

The seed that falls on thorny soil focuses too much on the things of this world. The cares or the anxieties of life, the lure of money and the desire to have things stay the way they are.

It's like a person who has no strength to overcome the things the world offers. They're too shiny. They're too gleamy. This person prizes worldly things above the ultimate prize of history, Jesus himself.

[15 : 53] But the last person hears well. This is the one who listens properly. He is the one who has paid careful attention to what Jesus says and as a result produces this huge crop of fruitfulness for the kingdom.

So what's so different about this person? How does this hearing differ from the others? Well, the clue is in verse 20. Others, like seeds sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop 30, 60, 60, or even 100 times what is sown.

The accepting of the word is key. That's the difference. The Greek means to welcome it in. To welcome it in.

To receive it openly, with open arms. It's welcoming someone with a personal interest. You've got to, it's like seeing a friend. Hey, hey, great to see you.

Come and, hey, let's chat. Come and visit. There's an openness, a warmth to God's word from this person to God's word that allows it to flourish in their life.

[17 : 07] You remember one of the big issues that God has with his people in the Old Testament? Hard hearts. Not soft hearts. Cold hearts.

Not warm hearts. He doesn't like people who give him the cold shoulder. There's another interesting thing in the text that tells us how the different hearings or listenings operate.

And we want to know that because we don't want to be the ones that don't listen well. We want to be the ones that listen well because there's this huge fruitfulness that accompanies them. If you don't listen well, there's some serious consequences for not listening well.

It's rather obscure in the English but it's a lot clearer in the Greek and I know that because I read the commentaries and they helpfully point that out.

And so the first few hearings are what the first few times you hear here, the first time you read the word here or listen in the text, the one that's on the path, the rocky soil, the thorny soil.

[18 : 15] That hearing, that verb is in what's called the aorist tense. In English we've got past, present, future but you know we've got a whole plethora of other tenses, past, perfect, future, perfect and others.

There's a whole bunch of them. The Greek has even more. One of them is called the aorist tense and this is something that is it's a punctilio action. It's got a it's not a long line.

It's like a poink, it happens and then it's done. Almost like in the past tense but it's used at various times. Something that happens is done and is finished. So the first three types of hearing are done in this tense.

It's thus a quick, superficial, in one ear, out the other, hearing. No effort, no thought, no latching on, no taking hold.

It's a quick hearing and instant dismissal of the information. Oh, boom, oh, whatever, cool, something else to do. Oh, okay. Oh, you realize something happened, you've got something better to do.

[19 : 20] It's not really going in. But in verse 20, the good soil, the one that hears and accepts and bears fruit, that hearing is in a different tense.

It's in the present tense. The old ones use the aorist tense, boom, quickly done. This one is present, almost like the present continuous. We would say, he goes on listening.

He listens and keeps on listening. There's a present, continual, ongoing listening as opposed to a careless or inattentive listening. So those are the different kind of listenings that are going on there.

And obviously, Jesus is saying, listen, I want you to listen properly and I want you to grab on and hold on to my words. Don't just treat them as if they, just quickly, superficially. Don't do that because then you won't catch the things that I want you to get.

Now, let me ask at this point, what kind of listening you have given to Jesus in your life? Just how attentive and receptive have you been?

[20 : 25] You know, Jesus says things that are hard to swallow and hard to follow. In the other Gospels, in the Sermon on the Mount, for example, he says, if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off.

If you lust in your heart, you've already committed adultery. Do not worry, he says on another occasion. It's a command. Then he says, I am the way, the truth, and the life, meaning he's the only way, the only truth, and the only life.

So in order to really get to grasp what Jesus is saying, you need to listen properly so that you can understand and obey well. This takes effort.

It takes concentration. But it is effort that pays off because Jesus also says things that will bring life and goodness and blessing to you and you want that as well.

If you let his words into your life and take root, you get these amazing things. I am the water of life. Whoever comes to me will never be thirsty.

[21 : 31] I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever comes to me will receive eternal life. I am the son of God. Whoever joins me, I will make sons of the Father and heirs of the kingdom.

Have you made a habit of spending time with Jesus? Yes, our lives are busy. But we get busy, we get frenetic, we get anxious, we get worried, we make silly mistakes, we say and do things we don't like to do.

Huh. Maybe we need to spend time in prayer, in reading his words. Maybe we need to spend more time in reading the words of people that explain his words better. Not just reading the Bible.

Good, do it. Maybe you need to read books about the Bible that will help you understand it better or listen to talks about that. Now there's two reasons you want to do this. Two good reasons why you want to listen and grab hold of Jesus' words.

The first reason is that you will bear huge amounts of fruit if you do. This fruit will, you'll bear fruit in your own life and then you will bear fruit for the kingdom.

[22 : 40] The more time you spend listening to Jesus, the more effective you will be in this cosmic kingdom conflict that is happening on earth. You'll be a better soldier basically and you'll survive longer in the battle.

The second reason is that being attentive and receptive to Jesus' words will stop you from falling to the enemy or being killed. That's a good reason to listen to someone.

Remember, kingdom language is warfare language. Now, in wartime, you don't just go in and fight. You first go to a briefing about what the upcoming battle is about and what the strategies must be to win the battle.

When you go to that briefing, you want to pay special attention to the intel officer. He's going to tell you what areas to avoid. Okay, the minefields are in that direction.

Don't go there. There's a machine gun emplacement over there. Don't go there. Okay, I want you to take your do this and that and go bomb those guys. Then we're going to win. You're taking notes. You're listening. If you sit in that briefing and just let the words bounce off, oh, whatever.

[23 : 49] I'm not bothered. You don't take notes. I'm worried. I'm thinking about something else. My wife, my life, my job.

It's not that interesting. I'm sure I can. You know what? I can do better. I know more than these guys. I'll be okay. If you sit in that briefing and just let the words bounce off your ears or your mind is on other things, you won't be able to understand the battle plan.

It will remain a secret to you. You are going to battle seriously underprepared. You're going to put your life at risk as well as the people under your care. Does that help you understand why it's important to listen to Jesus?

You get a reward and be careful if you don't because you're going to die. So there's a good reason to listen to him. Now this explains why Jesus is so dismissive. That strange section in verse 11 and 12 which is the way Mark constructs this passage is sort of the key to understanding this whole passage.

This explains why Jesus is so dismissive in verse 12 about the people who see but don't see and hear but don't hear. As the king of God's kingdom he wants an army that is going to listen to him because he's the king.

[25 : 08] He's the general. He knows the master plan. He knows the enemy. He knows what's going to keep you alive and he knows how he's going to win. So you've got to listen to him. He wants an army that will listen to him to follow his orders and win battles.

He doesn't have time to waste on slackers. He's basically saying listen join me or get out of my way but don't waste my time. Quite a quite a direct don't you think?

He's not messing around this Jesus. Alright so the first surprise in this section about how the kingdom works is it comes in a secret and hidden way and is kept hidden from some and revealed to others.

The unlocking of that is by those who make the effort to spend time with Jesus and listen to his words. But there are some in this parable perhaps many who will not listen to him and will ultimately reject his word.

where then does this leave his kingdom? You notice in the parable three quarters of the seed fall on soil that doesn't produce anything and only one quarter of the seed is defective.

[26 : 18] So this first parable creates a tension in the passage that is unresolved by the last two parables and that brings us to the second point which is really the last point is about the surprising growth of the kingdom the surprising growth of the kingdom.

It could seem like from the first parable that the kingdom is not very effective. The sower just chucks the seed wherever he can and seems to hope for the best.

Will the kingdom actually achieve anything like this? Will the seed the word that God plants actually grow? The answer of the last two parables is with a resounding yes and then some.

and it will grow because God will make it grow. There's two reasons why the kingdom will grow like this. It's surprising but there's two reasons why it does this.

The first one it will grow because God will make it grow. God is the source of its generation of the generation of the kingdom like he's the source of the generation of the seed.

[27 : 25] Notice how in the first of the last two parables so many parables flying around here you might in your Bible it's from verse 26 you might have a heading the parable of the growing seed that's fine you can use that.

Notice how the man scatters the seed and goes to sleep and wakes up and has no clue about how the stuff grows but it does. All he did was scatter the seed once it's in the soil God's word the seed God's word has this power all of its own.

to grow and it does this because it's God's word because it's God's word and because the God of the Bible has seriously green fingers.

I don't know if you've noticed this but throughout the story of the Bible God is someone who makes things grow. Genesis 1 there's all this stuff in creation trees, bushes, plants trees I've said trees vegetation everything that uses growing stuff think of Eden and the lushness and vegetation and the trees and the bushes and the fruit he just loves to make things grow and in particular he loves to make things grow that can then give life to something else that's what he tells Adam to do and then you go to the end of the Bible and you have an even lusher it's not a great word I can think of a better one greener more verdant more extravagant growth remember our series in Revelation and it ends with this tree with rivers fruit twelve times a year remember that?

Revelation 20-21 if you need to get your memory there it's like God has taken some sort of cosmic fertilizer and poured it all over creation and then you have passages all over the Old Testament that talk about his promise of salvation in exactly the same terms take for example Isaiah 55 you might want to turn there I don't have it on the screen so you might just keep your hand in Mark chapter 5 and then Isaiah it was close to our reading Isaiah 6 reading not really close to Isaiah 6 is it?

[29 : 43] Isaiah 56 so Isaiah 55 interesting bit in Isaiah 55 about God's word that won't return to him empty maybe just read from verse 10 so Isaiah 55 verse 10 notice actually Isaiah 55 verse 1 invitation to the thirsty you notice that?

come to me all you who are thirsty come to the waters you have no money come buy and eat come buy wine and milk without money and without cost God's saying come to me and I'm going to give you good things then verse 10 as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater so my word that goes out from my mouth it will not return to me empty it will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it and what is this purpose?

and notice the imagery that God uses in the next few verses you will go out in joy and be led forth in peace the mountains and the hills will burst in song before you and all the trees of the fields will clap their hands instead of the thorn bush will grow the pine tree instead of the briars the myrtle will grow this will be for the Lord's renown for an everlasting sign which will not be destroyed this is a huge encouragement for us especially considering how hidden and secret and rejected God's kingdom seems to be in our day in particular our time and space potentially God cannot help but make things grow especially his kingdom wherever his word is spread it will have an effect yes this takes faith on our part we don't necessarily see it but this is where trust comes in in wartime you don't necessarily know the master plan in fact it's hidden from the soldiers on purpose because they're going to blurt it out and tell the enemy something they shouldn't know we must trust that God has given us enough information to get on with extending his kingdom as best we can with the resources we have knowing that he will supply us with all we need to get the job done he'll supply us with all the ammo we need won't run out of ammo in the fight of God's kingdom anyway if God is going to make it grow what opposition what opposition what enemy has any chance against that none and then just the last point

God's kingdom is going to grow really really big is it going to grow parable of the sower so few people are responding to it well yes it's going to grow really really big that's the parable of the mustard seed the surprise here is that the kingdom starts so small insignificant tiny can't do anything it's a little mustard seed it's just an ordinary garden shrub not like this it's not just a shrub a bush my kingdom is going to be like a bush hmm and yet once it's in the ground the God of the universe takes that seed tiny seed and makes it grow and grow and grow until it becomes like a mighty tree with huge branches and it overshadows all the other trees in the garden and provides shelter and shade for others what's going on with this thing about trees and branches well this is stock

Old Testament imagery taken from places like Daniel chapter 4 and Ezekiel 17 we can check that out we'll probably get to that in our growth groups this week where the kingdoms of this world are described as huge cedar trees that are so large that other kingdoms are subservient to them and these are the world empires of Babylon and Assyria and Egypt etc so what Jesus is saying here is that not only does the kingdom of God have this sort of auto growth hormone built into it it's going to overtake and supplant all the other kingdoms of the world Jesus kingdom is going to be the winner in the cosmic world for the rulership of the world doesn't that encourage you where does that leave us today well if you want to be on the winning side of history you're going to want to be part of the kingdom of God which means you need to have Jesus as your king if you already belong to the kingdom and have Jesus as your king good now get busy sowing we should be sowing the word of God as far and wide as the sower does in the first parable just chuck it all over knowing that God will make it grow yes there will be those who don't get it that's okay that's part of God's plan but others will we have God's own promise that he will make it grow and what's more that our sowing this is the incredible part our sowing will be part of the reason why his kingdom will ultimately have the victory over all the other rival kingdoms the more we sow the more God can grow and the better the harvest will be

[35 : 14] Revelation 7 says this vision of John I looked up to heaven and I saw a multitude a multitude too large to count a countless multitude of people from every nation and tribe and people and tongue standing before the throne and before the lamb they were wearing white robes and holding out palm branches in their hands and they cried out in a loud voice salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the lamb and won't that be a sight to see let's pray dear Lord Jesus thank you so much for your word it is powerful it does its work and we want to hear it and listen to it so that we can be part of this kingdom we want your word to grow in our lives Lord so that we grow up to be strong in your kingdom we want to be effective for your kingdom and fruitful bless us Lord as we do that to our life's end

Amen which is