

A Kingdom that Grows

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[0:00] Today's scripture reading is taken from Mark chapter 4, verse 26 to 34.

! Please follow along your Bible, and if you don't have one, please do still grab one from the front or at the back of the door. And the passage today is on page 788.

788. Hear then God's word to us today. And he said, The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground.

He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows. He knows not how. The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear.

But when the grain is ripe at once, he puts in the sickle because the harvest has come. And he said, With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it?

[1:12] It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth. 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.

With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it. He did not speak to them without a parable, but privately, to his own disciples, he explained everything.

Let us believe and respond to God's true and living word. Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, thank you for giving us your word.

And thank you for your promise that as rain falls to the earth and waters the earth and makes things grow, you promise that your word, which goes forth from your mouth, will not return to your void, but it will accomplish your purposes for which you sent it.

And so would you be faithful to your promise, to accomplish your purpose this morning, through the preaching of your word. We pray, give us ears to hear, open our hearts to your word, so that we may hear your voice to us.

[2:55] We pray all these things for your glory and for your name's sake. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. My father passed away last December.

It was a sad time for me and my family. But the seeds of God's word was sown by me, by my family members, in his life for many, many years.

But I don't know what happened in the end. Whether he responded to the gospel, accepted the invitation to come and repent and trust in Jesus. I don't know what happened in the end.

And perhaps you can relate and you've had similar experience. You've shared the gospel and you have prayed for other people, perhaps your family members, and faithfully sown the seed of God's word for many, many years without seeing much fruit.

It seems as though nothing is happening. Now, every time someone repents and believes in Jesus, God's kingdom expands.

[4:05] As another person confesses Jesus is their king, is his king. The question I want us to consider this morning is this.

Is the kingdom of God growing around us? Is the kingdom of God growing around you?

In our family, in our neighborhood, at a school, at work, in Hong Kong, is the kingdom of God growing? In Japan, there's an increasing number of churches that have aging congregations, and some churches are disappearing.

Some are without pastors and shepherds to lead them. In the post-World War II history of the church in Japan, the evangelical Christian population in Japan has never exceeded 1% of the population.

So is the kingdom of God growing in Japan? What about Hong Kong? Now, because I know Kevin, and he tells me about what God is doing in your midst, and I know you have seen baptisms, and people coming to faith, and getting baptized, and becoming followers, committed followers of Jesus,

and that's wonderful.

[5:33] The church is growing, and praise God for that. I'm so excited to hear all these good news and good things happening in this church. But in Hong Kong, at large, according to one research, between 2014 and 2024, evangelical churches' worship attendance dropped by 35%.

I'm sure there are many, many reasons for that. But the question is, is the kingdom of God growing around us? Now, we might still pray, Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come.

We might still pray those words and pray those prayers, but do we pray your kingdom come with the same passion and expectation we had once before?

When we don't see much visible growth and fruit from our sowing of the gospel seeds, and have our hopes for God to save those people around us, have our expectations and passion, have those things slowly grown cold?

When God's kingdom, Jesus' saving reign as king, when God's kingdom doesn't seem to be advancing around us, it might be easy for us to lose sight of who we really are, lose sight of and forget that we are citizens of God's kingdom, and we lose sight of the mission our King Jesus has entrusted to us.

[7:17] Instead, we might begin to live as though we belong entirely to the kingdom of this world, and we begin to pursue the things that everybody else in this world is pursuing, whatever it may be.

Our concern for sharing the good news of Jesus, and for being salt and light on earth begins to fade, and rather than longing for the growth and expansion of God's kingdom, become more concerned and more focused on making our own lives here and now a little bit more easier, a little bit more comfortable, a little bit more enjoyable.

Now, these comforts in life and enjoyments in life, they're not bad things necessarily, but our lives can easily become more about us than about God's kingdom and about the expansion and the growth of God's kingdom.

So this morning, we want our hearts and minds to be renewed and reshaped by God's word and the vision of the kingdom of God that God has given us in his word.

In Mark chapter 4, Jesus teaches what the kingdom of God looks like through many parables, and in today's passage, which we just heard, we see that the growth of the kingdom of God is certain.

[8:50] The growth of the kingdom of God is certain. And we're going to see this certain growth of God's kingdom in four words.

Those are my four points. And these four words describe how the kingdom grows for certain. These four words, mysterious, gradual, disproportionate, and participatory.

Mysterious, gradual, disproportionate, and participatory. I can't even say. And I wish I was smart enough to come up with some, you know, alliteration or something.

So it's easy to remember, but I couldn't. So here we go. That's all I got. So here we go. Number one, the growth of God's kingdom is mysterious. Look back at verse 26.

Jesus says that the kingdom of God is like when a man scatters seed on the ground. And verse 27 says, we're told what happens to the seed that man sows. Look at, look at verse 27.

[9:57] He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows. He knows not how. The man doesn't know how the seed grows, but it does.

It grows. It's, it's a mysterious growth. And in verse 28, Jesus says, the earth produces by itself. Now this, this phrase by itself in the original language is the word that became the source for our English word automatic.

In other words, what Jesus is saying here is that the seed sown on the ground will automatically grow. Without any help, it will grow.

That's what Jesus is saying. You know what, uh, morning glory is morning glories. You guys have that here. Okay. All right. Uh, in Japanese, it's called Asagao.

And every elementary school student in Japan, at least once during the course of elementary school, at least once they, they have to grow morning glory asagao in a science class or something.

[11:12] Now, I think they use that particular flower in science class because it's so easy to grow that. Anybody can grow morning glory.

Um, but even morning glories that anybody can grow need to be watered and placed in the sun for it to, to, to grow.

No. But what is surprising in what Jesus is saying is that the seed sown by the person grows by itself.

Even if that person does nothing. Now, it doesn't, it doesn't say he, this, this farmer who went out and sowed a seed, it doesn't say that he prepared the soil or applied fertilizer or provided adequate water and sunlight, anything like that.

It doesn't say anything like that. He, he just simply scatters the seed and it grows. And Jesus says, that person who scatters the seed doesn't know how it grows.

[12 : 17] There's nothing, but he doesn't know how it grows. That means that it is not by the efforts of the person who sowed the seed or by the wisdom and skill and knowledge he possesses to make the seed grow.

So, what Jesus is teaching here is that the growth of God's kingdom does not ultimately depend on human effort or human wisdom.

We don't know how, but the kingdom grows mysteriously by the power and wisdom of God. Now, when you hear that, when you hear God's kingdom grows by God's power and God's wisdom, we might think, well, of course, of course we know that.

Of course, the kingdom of God grows by God's power. Duh. But the question is, do we really believe that? And more importantly, do we really live as though we believe that?

When someone comes to faith through our evangelism, our sharing of good news, or when our children embrace their faith because we taught them the gospel, when that happens, aren't we sometimes tempted to give too much, a little too much credit to what we did rather than God's power, what God has done?

[13 : 41] Or, on the other hand, don't we sometimes act as if it's our responsibility and it's up to us to make the seed grow, especially when it comes to our children.

we pour ourselves into teaching, teaching them, praying for them, and setting an example. And these are wonderful things that we must do.

But before long, we can begin to feel as though the outcome rests on us. But the kingdom of God expands automatically, by itself, without help.

It just grows mysteriously by the power of God. So that's the first one. Second, the growth of God's kingdom is gradual. Look again at verse 28.

The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. Do you hear the gradual nature of this growth?

[14 : 45] First this, then this, then this. A crop grows through distinct stages. It takes time. There's no shortcut that you can take.

You can't skip from planting the, the, the seed to harvest in the grain overnight. That's what Jesus is trying to say here. Jesus says that the growth of kingdom is, God's kingdom is much the same.

It unfolds gradually. According to God's timing, there are seasons and stages. It must go through.

And these seasons and stages that it goes through, they, they cannot be skipped or rushed or even delayed.

But if we're honest though, that's not what we want, is it? We want the seeds that we sow to bear fruit immediately.

Wouldn't it be great? You know, if you like tomatoes, I love tomatoes. You sow the, sow tomato seeds. And next day, next morning, boop, ripe juicy tomatoes.

[15 : 58] We want that, right? Wouldn't it be wonderful if we share the gospel with our neighbors, with our children, the coworkers, and almost overnight revival sweep through?

Wouldn't that be wonderful? Revival in Hong Kong, revival in Tokyo. Wouldn't it be amazing to see entire communities transformed spiritually, morally, and socially in a matter of days?

Wouldn't that be wonderful? But, perhaps, our expectations, our timetable, for the growth of God's kingdom, is not God's timetable.

Jesus says, just as a farmer patiently waits for the crop to mature, Jesus teaches his disciples to wait patiently for the growth of God's kingdom.

He wants us to trust that his kingdom will grow and spread according to God's perfect timing, not according to the schedule we would have chosen. And in verse 29, Jesus tells us how long this kingdom of God will continue to grow.

[17 : 18] 29 again. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle because the harvest has come. Now, at first glance, we might not see the significance of these words, but the first

readers of Mark, who were much more familiar with the Old Testament than we are, perhaps, they would have likely recognized that Jesus was echoing the language of an Old Testament passage, particularly in Joel chapter 3, verse 13.

This, in Joel chapter 3, verse 13, the same expression, putting in the sickle at harvest time. The same expression is used. Now, in Joel 3, 13, there the image of putting in the sickle at harvest points to this day when God will judge the nations and bring his people from all corners of the earth to be with him forever.

That day when God will bring his saving work to completion. It refers to that day. So, when Jesus speaks of the harvest in this passage, he's pointing beyond an ordinary harvest to the final day when he will return.

On that day, this broken world filled with sin and full of brokenness, he will fully restore this world and God's kingdom will be revealed in all of its fullness and everyone who trusted in Jesus will be gathered from the ends of the earth to live with him forever.

He's pointing to that day and Jesus' point here is that the kingdom of God will continue to grow until that day. It will not stop short.

[19:04] It will not fail and by God's power the kingdom will keep advancing but gradually until the harvest that God has appointed.

So, the kingdom of God, the growth of the kingdom of God is gradual and third, the growth of God's kingdom is disproportionate. Look back at verse 30, 32, 32.

And he said, with what can we compare the kingdom of God or what parable shall we use for it? It is like a grain of mustard seed which when sown on the ground is the smallest of all the seeds on earth 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.

Now, I know that many of us are familiar with this parable and Jesus' words and so because we're so familiar with this parable we tend to miss the shock factor when we read it.

but let's not skip over how ridiculously disproportionate the size difference is between a mustard seed and a fully grown tree.

[20:25] A mustard seed I looked it up is about one millimeter it's tiny a fully grown tree about three meters tall and three meters wide.

Now, when you hear three meters by three meters you might think huh okay it doesn't sound like a big tree to me right?

But, however in terms of the ratio in terms of the volume difference I realized that a fully grown tree is billions of times bigger heavier than the seed the difference is astronomical I was with mainland Chinese pastors who are faithfully preaching the gospel for a preaching workshop this past week here in Hong Kong and I've always been fascinated by the Chinese culture Chinese history who here any of you seen the Great Wall of China have you visited the Great Wall of China oh wow so many of you that's wonderful

I would love to go at some point who can tell me how long it actually is no one all right here we go 21,196 kilometers it's it's so mind-boggling it's hard to imagine how long that is and it was built over 2,000 years brick by brick stone block by stone block it was built and it's estimated 42 billion bricks or stones were used in the construction of this Great Wall now I bet you the people who laid the first brick they had no idea how massive this thing will turn out to be

Jesus says just as something as small as a grain of sand like a mustard seed grows into a large tree so the kingdom of God no matter how small and how insignificant it may seem now he says it will grow now when Mark's gospel was written the church lived under the rule and influence of the Roman empire and Christians were a tiny minority and from their perspective from human perspective it must have seemed like as though God's kingdom was making very little progress the reality they experienced probably fell far short of what they had expected now at times we may feel the same way in our context we look at our society and we see increasing turmoil increasing division instead of peace increasing hostility toward one another instead of love and moral confusion instead of righteousness and when we see all these things it can seem as though the kingdom of this world is gaining ground and the kingdom of God is standing still but Jesus tells us to see things very differently

[24:18] God's word tells us that even when nothing seems to be happening from a human perspective he says no no no God's at work God is growing his kingdom so that means we must not judge the kingdom by its appearance right now Jesus says the kingdom will grow and in the end oh

it will be so disproportionate to how it started that's what Jesus is teaching us here but Jesus is not telling us to just sit back and do nothing and simply wait for the kingdom to grow he has given us something to participate in so number four last point the growth of God's kingdom is participatory when Jesus told his parable he wanted his listeners to ask themselves where am I in this story what character am I now notice there's a role for us in this parable we're we're we're this man who goes out and scatters seed on the ground notice that the growth of God's kingdom begins with someone sowing the seed so what does it mean to sow the seed well

Jesus answers that question earlier in Mark chapter four he explained this parable of the sower to his disciples and he says in verse 14 Mark chapter four the sower sows the word so the seed in this parable and earlier parable represents God's word and to sow the seed is to proclaim God's word to share the good news of the gospel now ultimately Jesus himself is the first sower of the word at the beginning of Mark's gospel he went throughout Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God saying Mark chapter one verse 15 the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand repent and believe in the gospel so Jesus himself is the ultimately first sower of the word then through the great commission as we know Jesus entrusted that same mission to his disciples to go out and to proclaim

God's word proclaim the gospel and to continue sowing the seed of God's word until he returns so God has graciously ordained our participation in the growth of God's kingdom isn't that amazing God can do it all but he invites to participate in the growth of God's kingdom and giving us a task but when we preach the gospel when we share God's word when we talk about God and his word with others and sow the seed of God's word we often feel as though nothing is happening even after many many years of effort nothing there may be very little visible change in our own community in Tokyo there have been people who studied the

Bible with us attended our Sunday gathering heard the gospel for a time and then suddenly people might stop coming or they move away before their faith ever seemed to take root isn't it true that from our perspective we often sow gospel seeds but rarely get to see the fruit right away in our children in our friends in our family co-workers and yet Jesus teaches us that something real something is happening actually happening even when nothing appears to be happening from our perspective when we sow the seed of the gospel we're not we're not the ones that can make the seed grow that power to grow the seed that we sow that power belongs to God and his word and so we don't need to be anxious we don't need to be we don't need to be forcing things to grow only God can do that and when I look back on my own story I realize how many different people God had placed in my life and God used those people to sow the seed of the gospel in my life more than 30 years ago I was a high school student I went on this home stay program during summer vacation and my host family in LA they took me to church as my very first exposure to anything Christian then in my final year of high school my home!

[29:23] teacher! gave me a Bible which I don't think it was allowed but he did it anyway and it was through that Bible God would later lead me to faith in Jesus now at that time I don't think any of those people who sow the seed of God's word and the gospel in my life I don't think anybody had any idea what God would eventually do through those small acts of sowing God's word but God was at work quietly and faithfully bringing me to salvation and faith in Jesus and welcoming me into his kingdom and now three decades later there's a small but healthy local church in Tokyo and the kingdom of God is still growing now three summers ago I happened to be back in

LA as a family and I had the opportunity to reunite with the host family after for the first time you know after more than 30 years I was able to introduce them to Emma and my children and shared with them how God had been leading me and my family all these years but this raises an important question those people had no idea what happened to me what happened to the seed that they sowed so how can we believe how can we believe that something is truly happening when we see no visible growth in the seeds we sow how can we be confident how can we be so confident in saying that the growth of God's kingdom is certain when from our perspective nothing seems to be changing I believe Jesus would say to us look at me let's think about this

Jesus came into this broken world as a small helpless baby no major announcement no fanfare he came in quietly he came in discreetly and for most of his life he lived as an ordinary virtually unknown carpenter in this small town called Nazareth and when he died on the cross most people saw nothing more than the execution of another criminal even his own disciples who thought okay we think he's the Messiah but he died and they thought everything had come to an end and yet

underneath what many people thought was an insignificant death something massive was happening Jesus himself became the seed that fell to the ground and died and through that death came eternal life for all who believe that's what he was doing and not only that Jesus didn't stay dead he rose from the dead and now he's seated in heaven on his throne so we sang earlier Jesus is the king of kings forever he's the king of kings forever more Jesus is the king of an everlasting kingdom he is still growing his kingdom he's still expanding God's kingdom the reach of his kingdom brick by brick stone by stone through our sowing of the gospel isn't that amazing that he would use finite beings like us sinful people like us to expand his kingdom through our sharing our preaching of God's word until the kingdom becomes nothing like we have ever imagined if you are here and you're not yet a follower of

Jesus I don't know who you are I haven't met you but if you are here and if you're not a follower of Jesus I want you to know Jesus is inviting you into his kingdom Jesus wants you to come he has opened the door wide open for you to come into his kingdom all you have to do is to accept his invitation to come all you have to do is tell him that you want to turn from living your life your own way and turn to him and to walk with him all you have to do is to accept his invitation you can do that right here right now you don't need to wait the growth of God's kingdom is certain it is mysterious it is gradual it is disproportionate and it is participatory whenever we speak about Jesus with others whenever we teach God's word in a home or at a

[34 : 50] Bible study whenever we preach God's word on Sundays or sow the gospel into the lives of our children no matter how small or unfruitful it may seem our work is not in vain because our king is still growing his kingdom so brothers and sisters let us be faithful let us be faithful to continue to sow the seed continue proclaiming God's word continue sharing Jesus with those around us for the glory of our king and the growth of his kingdom because his kingdom growth is certain let's pray our gracious heavenly father we thank you for giving us a clear vision of your kingdom in your word help help us to continue to be faithful to share your word your gospel with those around us so that your kingdom may expand we thank you for this amazing amazing privilege of being participants in this kingdom work would you use us show

Jesus to those around us through us we pray in Jesus name amen