

## THE PARABLES OF JESUS, #016 A Chronological Study

*"To Him who opened His mouth in parables and  
uttered things hidden since the creation of the world."  
Psalm 78:2*



**"The Mustard Seed"  
The Mysteries of the Kingdom  
Matthew 13:31-32; Mark 4:30-32; Luke 3:18-19<sup>[1]</sup>**

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### INTRODUCTION

**The Linear Text:** (combining Matthew, Mark & Luke).

[Mk 4:33] With many such parables He was speaking the Word to them, so far as they were able to hear it; [Mk 4:30] And He said, "How shall we picture the kingdom of God, or by what parable shall we present it? [Lk 13:18] "What is the kingdom of God like, and to what shall I compare it?

[Mt 13:31] *"The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field; [Mk 4:31b] when sown upon the soil, though it*

*is smaller than all the seeds that are upon the soil, yet when it is sown, it grows up, and becomes larger than all the garden plants and forms large branches [Mt 13:32c] and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air [Lk 13:19b] nested in its branches."*

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### **Jesus and His Parables**

*[Mk 4:33] With many such parables He was speaking the Word to them, so far as they were able to hear it;*

Two lessons ago we dealt with Jesus' parable "The Sower, the Seeds, and the Soils." It was a lengthy study and full of context and details. We learned along the way that Jesus' plan of action through these parables was to describe important kingdom details in such a way that those whom God had prepared to hear the meaning would hear it, and those whom God had not prepared would not hear it. Here in this first verse from Mark's Gospel telling of this story Jesus again confirms this process.

For those who don't believe God, don't believe the Bible, the same is still true today. The truths of the Bible are only really discernable when the Holy Spirit of God gives the true meaning to the individual who is seeing or hearing the Word of God - even when reading or hearing Jesus' answers to the disciples questions about the parables.

It's also important to remember that the Holy Spirit continues to reveal more and more truths to believers as they grow in faith and understanding God's Word. Always remember to ask Him for more knowledge in the Scriptures. He will be pleased with your request!

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### **Jesus' relationship to God the Father and God the Holy Spirit.**

Jesus asks a rhetorical question of His disciples: *[Mk 4:30] And He said, "How shall we picture the kingdom of God, or by what parable shall we present it?"*

We've mentioned before that The Son of God, Jesus, during His earthly life and ministries, had willingly given up certain use of His attributes as God in order to come to earth and become God's willing servant in the matter of expressing God's grace and love for those who would believe upon His Son.

Here, in this short parable we might see evidence of that relationship. We can see it here when Jesus asks, "How shall **we** picture the Kingdom of God,

or by what parable shall **we** present it?" As I look upon the placement of this single verse it seems to me that He's actually asking His disciples a rhetorical question. He's just finished telling another parable concerning the importance of knowing that, "The soil produces crops by itself." A clear teaching that it is the ministry of every believer to "produce crops" by spreading the "seed," which is the Word of God. So, the logical answer to this little riddle is the question that Jesus asks of His disciples...

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## **A Description of the Kingdom of God**

[Lk 13:18] *"What is the kingdom of God like, and to what shall I compare it?"*

Here in Luke we find the continuation of that question. So far in our chronological study of these parables we've learned what kind of people qualify to enter into the Kingdom of God.

When we stepped into the parables of Matthew Chapter 13, we entered into "The Parables of the Kingdom." We began that part of our journey with the first 23 verses of the chapter and "The Sower, Seeds, and Soils," and we found that God sows His Word and only a selection of those who hear it will actually believe and eventually enter into that Kingdom.

Now Jesus has the right parabolic image to tell his disciples so they might understand this part of the descriptions of the Kingdom of God.

Briefly, we need to understand Jesus' expression, "The Kingdom of God" and "The Kingdom of the heavens." In our last lesson, "The Wheat and the Tares," the two terms are largely synonymous. God is sovereign over all creation. The Bible says that Jesus held the power of creation and that God (the trinity) knows all things – right down to each blade of grass and the welfare of even the sparrow. God is sovereign over the various kingdoms of man on earth. Specifically, God is sovereign over His chosen people the descendants of Abraham [both the physical (Jew) and spiritual (Jew & Gentile) descendants]. The immediate context of these parables is the works of Jesus among the people of Israel in their land of Israel – so we will focus our comments upon that "kingdom." We found that Jesus is The "Born King" of this kingdom. [The "Born King" brings into focus the differences between the "declared," "elected," or "self imposed" king, and the King who was "Born King" as the Son of the King of the Universe.] We also need to know that "this kingdom" in this parable is a miniature version of "The Kingdom of God" – the big picture. Specifically, the people of Israel had been in long-term expectation of finalizing their promise of corporately entering into the

Promised Land Kingdom that was promised to them by God, through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. That promised was never completely fulfilled due to the nation's rebellion against God Himself. In these verses we see Jesus telling His disciples what that promised final Kingdom of believers is like.

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## **The Kingdom of God is like... a mustard seed**

**[Mt 13:31]** *"The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field;*

This is a simple illustration. We could try to make all kinds of assumptions that would lead us nowhere. So, let's try to keep it simple and see where it goes.

The image is easy to understand. First, as we have recently mentioned... The Kingdom of Heaven ... which a man took and sowed in His field. Once again, that man is Jesus. Now, make it personal and visualize yourself out standing in your field and you have a single little seed and you plant it with the purpose of it growing and being fruitful.

The Kingdom of God belongs to God. The field would be the area over which He is sovereign, the context of the parables is Israel. So, this seed and what happens to it represents what God's sovereignty for the nation of Israel in regards to the expected (fully grown and fruitful) Promised Kingdom.

**[Mk 4:31b]** when sown upon the soil, though it is smaller than all the seeds that are upon the soil, yet when it is sown, it grows up, and becomes larger than all the garden plants and forms large branches **[Mt 13:32c]** and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air **[Lk 13:19b]** nested in its branches."

Jesus simply describes the qualities of this little seed. It's tiny, but when it matures it becomes exceedingly large.

This part of our picture seems easy – The Kingdom of God, expressed as the Nation of Israel in its quest to attain to the Promised Kingdom started off with just Abraham and the fulfillment of the promise would be a kingdom whose people numbered greatly.

**[Gen 22:17]** *"indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies."*

Here we have a very good definition of the promise and how the “seed” would grow exceedingly.

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### **“The Birds In The Trees”**

**Now we have one small detail left to consider.**

“so that the birds of the air [\[Lk 13:19b\]](#) nested in its branches.”

Scholars are divided into two groups on this single phrase. I’d love to be so brilliant that I can tell you which ideas are what Jesus intended, or which the disciples understood... but I too can see both ideas, as both are true of what Jesus was experiencing in that Kingdom of God known as Israel during His time on earth.

**First, the positive group - God's final Kingdom.** Simply put, the Kingdom of God grows and grows from a small beginning to a very large Kingdom, and “the birds of the air,” everyone who comes to that kingdom, makes their “nests”, homes there and are all safe. I like this answer because

that is what I expect when it's my turn to enter into that final heavenly Kingdom. Peace and safety will be found there in abundance. And that will be true of the final Kingdom of God.

### **Second, the kingdom of Israel focused group understanding.**

Throughout the Scriptures birds are seldom described as good things. Yes eagles, who spread their wings of power and shelter, are positive things, but common birds are more often seen as representative of things evil. So, if our birds are evil...?

Jesus speaks often of the scribes and Pharisees as evil. Could it be that this image of the birds represents those evil forces which infiltrated the Jewish religious system and slowly perverted it. It was they who called His miraculous works as being powered by the devil and called Him Satan. A fact that will never be forgiven them.

Why do these scholars bring this up? Because this parable is right in the middle of parables that all speak of the evil brought in by the scribes and Pharisees. Why would Jesus put in a very small, very positive little parable about the Kingdom? There lays our dilemma.

What is my recommendation? Consider these two opposing ideas as two sides of one coin. Jesus didn't go on to explain His meaning of the "birds." Both sides of this coin give us a great deal of area for thought and exploration of the truth contained in God's word.

They also should give us pause as we consider our age of the Church, the Body of Christ. The writers of the epistles give us great warnings to be aware that men and women of evil can get involved with the local church and attempt to pervert it. We can see all around us the continuing dissolution of churches, and church doctrines. Many of us can point to places and times we know where the evil one has entered into a local church and destroyed it. Of all the churches in your area... how many teach the Gospel, how many are Bible centered, how many loudly proclaim the name of Jesus? Lots of food for thought.

As a closing remark, the focus of this parable is not the birds of the trees. As we have seen they can be either positive or negatives aspects and it is good to be aware of each. Positively, we can see how the Gospel went from a single God-man, Jesus, to a world wide population of believing individuals. His mustard seed has truly grown around the world. Negatively, we need to be always aware that this same population is also populated with anti-Christ's of all kinds. It is every believer's responsibility to bring continued growth to that Kingdom and to help route-out those evil ones who have

come to roost in our branches. The apostle Paul spends a lot of time trying to educate us about the dangers presented by those "birds in the trees." He even sets up Deacons and Elders as those responsible for keeping the Church of Jesus Christ clean of those birds both physically and educationally. So the focus thrust of the parable was primarily to His disciples, telling them that His Kingdom would become a great kingdom that would offer amazing growth.

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### **FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS WITHOUT ANSWERS**

1. Why is Jesus teaching by parables?
  2. In the time of Jesus' ministry, who is "the man who took and sowed" the mustard seed in his field?
  3. What is the field where He sowed this seed?
  4. What is good about the growth of this seed?
  5. What is bad about the growth of this seed?
  6. What do you think is the message of this parable?
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### **FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS WITH ANSWERS**

1. Why is Jesus teaching by parables?  
According to what Jesus had to say in previous parables God had made it so that those who would not believe could not understand the teachings hidden in a parable, "lest they would return and be forgiven." [Mk 4:12]
2. In the time of Jesus' ministry, who is "the man who took and sowed" the mustard seed in his field?  
Jesus is talking about His Kingdom and about Himself. In the previous parable He identifies Himself (God) as the one who plants the seeds.
3. What is the field where He sowed this seed?  
The context indicates that Jesus is sowing His seed in the nation of Israel (the promised people awaiting deliverance into the promised Kingdom of God). By secondary application His words also apply to us who believe as we await His second coming.
4. What is good about the growth of this seed?

God's plan from the beginning was for creation to "go forth and multiply" [Plants, animals, and especially mankind]. This seed grew from a very small seed to a very large tree.

**5.** What is bad about the growth of this seed?

Birds of the air came and nested in this tree. In the scriptures birds who come all turn out to be evil with the exception of the eagle. We can assume that Jesus is warning His listeners that among all this splendid growth – evil has come to roost there as well.

**6.** What do you think is the message of this parable?

This is a hard parable to completely discern. If the birds are good – finding safety in the tree, then we could see the growth of "The Kingdom of Heaven." This is a great answer for we who follow so long after Christ's death and resurrection. Oh-my, how His Kingdom on earth has grown, great growth, many branches, many birds enjoying the branches of the trees.

The only downside to this interpretation is that the nation of Israel and the believers of this age are really only a remnant out of all those who call themselves believers – and that doesn't really fit the small seed to exceedingly large tree metaphor. If the birds are bad – entering into a general world growth from little to large, then we could see what we know happened to Israel. It started small and grew large several times. Each cycle the religious leadership of the nation became corrupt (the birds) and led the nation in rebellion against God. This is very apparent at the time of Jesus, the Son of God, who was persecuted by the religious leadership even unto death. And then, even in our age, much of "Christendom" is non-Christian and unbelieving... even of the Bible and the Savior message of it. A great growth... full of dirty birds nesting in its branches.

But, the question is... What do you think?

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Jeremiah 18:15

"Don't stumble from the Ancient Path"

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<sup>[1]</sup> All scriptures are from the NASB unless otherwise noted.