

# SEEDS OF HOPE

SERIES: THE PARABLES OF JESUS



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Mark 4:1-20

Fifth Message

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*Mark 4:1-20*

In a children's story by Arnold Lobel, Toad was impressed by Frog's beautiful garden. Frog gave his friend some seeds and told him:

*"Plant them in the ground, and soon you will have a garden." Toad ran home, planted the seeds, and told them, "Now seeds, start growing!" He walked back and forth impatiently and even shouted at the seeds, but he saw no growth. Frog happened by, and Toad complained, "My seeds will not grow." Frog told him, "You are shouting too much. These poor seeds are afraid to grow. ... Leave them alone for a few days. Let the sun shine on them, let the rain fall on them. Soon your seeds will start to grow." That night, Toad looked out the window and, seeing no signs of growth, concluded that the seeds were afraid of the dark. So he got up, took some candles with him, and read the seeds a story to calm their fears. In the following days, he sang songs and read poems, but to no avail.<sup>1</sup>*

On the surface, you can't see whether seeds are growing. On the surface, if you look out on our world, there is more than enough to depress you all day, every day. But we all know that appearances can be deceiving.

Long before Arnold Lobel wrote his story about seeds, Jesus told a story about seeds to help us understand what's really going on in our world, appearances notwithstanding. We call it the Parable of the Sower.

In Mark 4, Jesus begins teaching in parables after sensing that his life and mission are in danger. The Pharisees concluded that he was such a menace that they began conspiring to put him to death. Jesus then withdrew to the Sea of Galilee and to a mountain, but when he returned to the seaside town of Capernaum, a hostile delegation of scribes from Jerusalem tracked him down and accused him of being in league with the devil (Mark 3).

Jesus has won over the masses by healing the sick and liberating the possessed, but his inclusive and seemingly unpatriotic message has provoked controversy wherever he has gone. He doesn't stop preaching, nor does he water

down his message, but he forsakes the synagogue for the open air of the seashore and begins teaching cryptically, in parables, in part to keep his enemies off balance. Jesus' message was so explosive that he needed to take extreme care in delivering it.

For those with ears to hear, the Parable of the Sower, and the other parables in Mark 4, explains how the kingdom of God is breaking into the world in and through Jesus and his followers.

What's really going on in our world? The Parable of the Sower features four short chapters.

## The first three chapters

**Mark 4:1-7:**

**Again he began to teach beside the sea. And a very large crowd gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat in it on the sea, and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land.**

<sup>2</sup> **And he was teaching them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them:**

<sup>3</sup> **"Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow.**

<sup>4</sup> **And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it.**

<sup>5</sup> **Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil.**

<sup>6</sup> **And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away.** <sup>7</sup> **Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain.**

Using a boat as a pulpit, Jesus tells the crowd that has followed him a parable about a farmer who sows seeds. Right away he has their attention. Not only would they be familiar with sowing seeds, their lives also depended on doing so. Whether seeds produced a harvest may determine whether they eat.

In each of the first three chapters, Jesus raises hopes only to crush them. The seeds, though sown, produce no crops. The farmer fails with three types of ground.

Whether you're a farmer or not, even two thousand years after Jesus told the parable, you can probably resonate with it, because you know about failure. You know what it's like to try and fail, and you probably know what it is like to try and fail repeatedly. Unlike the farmers of Jesus' day, your survival may not be at stake, but multiple failures, especially vocational and relational failures, can suck the hope right out of your life.

Keep reading.

## The final chapter

### Mark 4:8-9:

**“And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.”<sup>9</sup> And he said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”**

How about that? The farmer, who failed three times with substandard soil, realizes a bumper crop with good soil. If you feel as if you've tried and failed repeatedly, know this: the final chapter hasn't been written. For the sake of our faith, God has a penchant for coming through at the last minute. Hope in him.

Jesus, who introduced the parable with an invitation to “listen,” concludes it with the words, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” Two prophets, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, employed similar wording to accuse their contemporaries of being spiritually blind and deaf (Jeremiah 5:21, Ezekiel 12:2). Jesus, in contrast, is hoping that at least some in his seaside congregation will be more receptive as he preaches, however enigmatically.

## The effect of the parables

### Mark 4:10-12:

**And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables.<sup>11</sup> And he said to them, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables,<sup>12</sup> so that**

**“they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.”**

Mark tells us that Jesus would regularly explain the meaning of his parables in private settings with his

disciples (Mark 4:33-34). Although he reports that Jesus taught a series of parables from the boat, Mark inserts a later private session into his narrative to highlight both the effect of Jesus' parables and Jesus' explanation of the parable of the sower.

The parables both reveal and conceal the nature of kingdom of God. To those who are following Jesus, the parables are revealing. To those who have rejected him, the parables remain a mystery.

The private session in Mark 4:10-20 includes not only Jesus' twelve disciples but also those who are “around him.” Jesus earlier identified those who were unrelated to him as his family members because they were sitting “around him,” even though his flesh-and-blood family members were nearby.

Those who accept his teaching have been given “the secret of the kingdom of God,” which includes explanations concerning the meaning of the parables. Jesus reveals the secret to some, although it remains so profound that one could never completely penetrate it. However, those who place themselves “outside” by rejecting his teaching get everything in parables that they can't comprehend.

In part, Jesus teaches in parables to avoid arrest. His preaching has already drawn the attention of powerful enemies. To continue preaching his controversial message in a straightforward manner would draw even more unwanted attention and place his mission in further danger. Therefore, he teaches cryptically, in parables, intriguing those who are receptive to his message but confounding those who are opposed to it.

Invoking the words of Isaiah, Jesus sees himself in the stream of the prophet who preached in parables to hardened people. Jesus is not saying that he doesn't want certain people to “turn and be forgiven”; he's saying that certain people *won't* turn and be forgiven. He is not so much intending to divide as he is describing what must inevitably take place.<sup>2</sup>

## The secret is ours

Today, as in the first century, Jesus both intrigues and confounds with his parables. Depending on your disposition toward the gospel, the parables of Jesus either soften your heart or harden your heart—you embrace them as world-shaking stories of the kingdom of God or you dismiss them as irrelevant. A parable of Jesus—indeed, all truth—is like the sun, which has the

capacity to soften or harden a substance depending on the makeup of that substance.

I lived for a while in Redding, California, one of the hottest places in the state during the summer. One day, the temperature reached 118 degrees. That particular year was a drought year, and Shasta Lake was down. Ground that was no longer underwater turned to mud; then, the sun-baked mud cracked and became as hard as concrete.

One afternoon, I left a hard plastic fishing rod case in my car. When I returned, it had melted into the shape of a pretzel. The Redding sun hardened one substance but melted another. The parables of Jesus soften some hearts but harden others.

If you embrace the parables, Jesus says to you, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God.” Really? Yes. Does that mean you instantly understand the parables and assimilate them into your life? Probably not. It means you want to understand the meaning of the parables, and wanting to understand prepares you to understand.

If you want to understand the parables, what should you do? Stay “around” Jesus and accept his teaching. He will reveal to you the relevance of parables in his time according to your need for them. Do the parables of Jesus intrigue you? If so, stay close to him.

God has preserved for us in the scriptures these world-shaking stories of his kingdom. If you embrace the parables of Jesus, even if your understanding of them is incomplete, then to you—yes, to you—has been given the secret of the kingdom of God. What a gift!

Now unwrap this gift: Jesus’ interpretation of the parable.

## Vindication of vision

**Mark 4:13-20:**

**And he said to them, “Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? <sup>14</sup> The sower sows the word. <sup>15</sup> And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. <sup>16</sup> And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with**

**joy. <sup>17</sup> And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. <sup>18</sup> And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, <sup>19</sup> but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. <sup>20</sup> But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.”**

Jesus asks his disciples and other followers a rhetorical question: “How then will you understand all the parables?” He then proceeds to explain the meaning of the Parable of the Sower. They will understand the parables not only through Jesus’ explanations of them but also by understanding the meaning of the Parable of the Sower. His explanation of this parable, therefore, will help us understand the rest of his parables.

The seed in the parable represents the word. Earlier in the gospel and later in his commentary on Jesus’ parables, Mark notes that Jesus was speaking “the word” (Mark 2:2, 4:33). The sower, therefore, is Jesus, or anyone who preaches “the word,” for Jesus commissioned his disciples to preach (Mark 3:14).

What then is the word? The word is Jesus’ preaching about the arrival of the kingdom of God: the gospel message (Mark 1:15-16). The “word” in Isaiah 55:10-11, a passage that Jesus echoes in the telling of the parable, ultimately concerned the arrival of the kingdom. When Jesus evocatively equates his preaching with the word in Isaiah, he’s saying that the long-awaited kingdom of God is here. God is breaking in with his healing, loving rule in the person of the Jesus the Messiah.

The kingdom is not coming as expected, however. It is not coming visibly or suddenly. It is not coming with swords swinging but with seeds casting. Neither is the kingdom being universally embraced in Israel. Those in the know, such as scribes from Jerusalem and even Jesus’ own family, are resisting and even opposing the incoming kingdom. The different kinds of ground in the parable represent different kinds of receptivity Jesus’ message about the kingdom finds among those who hear it.

The parable functions to vindicate Jesus’ unorthodox vision of the kingdom and explain the unexpectedly mixed response within Israel to the arrival of the kingdom.

## Don't be surprised

In the parable, the condition of the ground—the condition of the hearts of those who hear the word—makes all the difference. Three kinds of unreceptive hearts allow various influences to prevent Jesus' preaching about the kingdom to produce spiritually fruitful lives.

Satan rules a rival kingdom in opposition to God and plucks the word away. Believing the message of Jesus draws the ire of those with opposing worldviews who prevent the word from taking root. Personal desires in conflict with the kingdom choke the word. In three "sowings," the word of the kingdom fails.

In a fourth sowing, however, the word succeeds—and succeeds in three ways, canceling out the threefold failure. The people of the fourth sowing, unlike those who succumbed to Satanic, worldly, and fleshly influences, "hear the word and accept it": they receive it deeply and respond to it exclusively.

Jesus' explanation encourages his followers to believe in his unorthodox vision of the kingdom even though it is encountering both resistance and opposition. Don't be surprised, the parable says, that the word of the kingdom is causing division in Israel, and know for sure that the word will be effective—remarkably so—with some.

The explanation also imparts a methodology for understanding all the parables of Jesus: hear the word of the kingdom as articulated by Jesus and accept it. The telling of the parable begins and ends with an invitation to listen. The explanation of the parable includes four appearances of the verb "hear" and commends those who "hear the word and accept it." Receptivity to the words of Jesus increases one's capacity to understand the parables, which convey his revolutionary—and, in many ways, counterintuitive—view of the kingdom.

## Believe it

The Parable of the Sower, like the other parables in Mark 4, awakens our dreams for a better world while at the same time redefining them. Although we might want for the instant realization of our dreams, the parable teaches us to wait for God to create what we could not dream.

The seeds of God's new world have been sown in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Most in our world—including, perhaps, many people we love—have

rejected the gospel. If we would expect a more universal response if in fact the kingdom of God has broken into this world, the Parable of the Sower redefines our expectations.

Jesus' description of resistance to the gospel resonates with our observations. We observe that the gospel seems to be immediately plucked away from some who hear it. We observe that some seemingly embrace the gospel but fall away when hard times come. We observe that some capitulate to anxiety and personal desires and forsake the gospel. The parable instructs us to prepare ourselves for such responses and to believe that God will vindicate the gospel.

Seeds have been sown. Seeds are being sown. Seeds will be sown.

No matter what you may have heard or seen, the kingdom of God has come. No matter what you may have heard or seen, the kingdom of God is coming. No matter what you may have heard or seen, the kingdom of God will come. Evil will be vanquished, and the kingdom of God will be established. Believe it!

Faith is believing in what you cannot see.

In C.S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters*, a senior devil, Screwtape, warns a junior devil, Wormwood, about God, their enemy: "Be not deceived, Wormwood, our cause is never more in jeopardy than when a human, no longer desiring but still intending to do our Enemy's will, looks round upon a universe in which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys."<sup>3</sup>

## Remarkably successful

Although we observe that the gospel fails to penetrate the hearts of many in our world, we also observe that some receive the gospel deeply, respond to it exclusively, and bear fruit for the kingdom into their latter years. Because of these men and women, we know that the problem is not with the seed but with the soil.

Yes, the word of the kingdom causes division, but it succeeds remarkably with some. The kingdom is present in the person of Jesus and his message and is penetrating hearts of some like seeds cast on good soil.

The success of the gospel with some, according to the parable, cancels out such resistance. The presence of a remnant of men and women who embrace the gospel—

particularly those whose passion for Christ burns into their latter years—serves to encourage us that the gospel will be vindicated.

This is one of the reasons I'm so thankful that Jesus' family in our church includes a strong contingent of spiritual grandparents. They have heard the word and accepted it. Their capacity for embracing truth has expanded with the years. Many of them are the prayer warriors of the church. They have borne fruit thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold.

Their resilient and ever-increasing faith, often in the face of loss, failing health, and death, encourages us to believe that the gospel has a glorious future. Because of them, we know we're not just whistling in the dark. How blessed we are to have such men and women in our midst.

## **Sow some seeds**

I stand before you as the product of the seeds that have been sown in my heart by faithful men and women. You sit before me, if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, as the product of the seeds that have been sown in your hearts by faithful women and men.

What then should we do? Sow some seeds!

In his song "For a Dancer," Jackson Browne sings, "Into a dancer you have grown / From a seed somebody else has thrown / Go on ahead and throw some seeds of your own."

Paul calls himself and the other apostles "stewards of the mysteries of God," and observes, "it is required of stewards that they be found faithful" (1 Corinthians 4:1-2). [The word translated "secret" (*mysterion*) in Mark 4:11 is the same word that is translated "mysteries" in 1 Corinthians 4:1.] Faithfulness is required, not success. We sow seeds; God causes growth (1 Corinthians 3:6).

Those who seem most promising may disappoint you. Those who seem least promising may surprise you. The seed grows underground, in the inner regions of the hearts of men, women, and children, in places you can't see.

Know this, however: every contribution to the kingdom of God counts, even if the seeds fall on bad soil. As you're faithful, something is happening in your heart, even if nothing happens in someone else's heart.

Moreover, if it's true that "in the Lord your labor is not in vain," then our labor in the Lord is never fruitless (1 Corinthians 15:58). Every contribution, no matter how small, contributes to the consummation of the kingdom of God.

You can't measure the results of kingdom work. Neither can you measure yourself by the apparent results of such work. The important thing is to do the work—to faithfully sow your seeds, season in and season out.

Faith is believing in what you cannot see. Faithfulness is acting on it.

Last Sunday, the students in our church who graduated from high school this year attended their last youth group meeting. All of them were invited to share a few words. Many of them spoke about what the church community had meant to them and about their aspirations to follow Jesus beyond their high school years. It was inspiring.

Some of them have known each other since they were born and have grown up together in the children's ministry, the middle school ministry, and the high school ministry. I thought of all the people who have sown seeds in their hearts at this church in those ministries, and I marveled.

Thank you! Your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

## **The faithful farmer**

What's really going on in our world?

The Parable of the Sower gives us a realistic assessment of our world while at the same time inspiring us to hope for something more. In particular, the parable inspires us to believe the gospel and participate in its mission. The seeds we sow for the kingdom will bear fruit, if not in this world, then in the new world. In fact, they will give birth to a new world.

When opposition presses in, when your faith lags, when depression overwhelms you, when you're tempted to look for hope elsewhere, remember the story of the failing but faithful farmer who realized a bumper crop.

So, beloved, believe the gospel and sow your seeds.

Remember Frog and Toad? After doing everything he could to make his seeds grow, an exhausted Toad

finally fell asleep. Later, Frog woke him and said, “Look at your garden!” Little green plants were coming out of the ground. “At last!” shouted Toad.<sup>4</sup>

I wonder: What will it be like when we wake up in God’s new creation to see what he has done with the seeds we’ve sown?

## Endnotes

1. Arnold Lobel, “The Garden,” *Frog and Toad Together* (New York: HarperCollins, 1971).
2. However, Jesus warned that someone who “blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness” (Mark 3:29). Some, perhaps among the scribes who accused Jesus of being in league with the devil, may have marked themselves out as permanently unrepentant. For someone who has permanently placed himself outside the kingdom of God, inability to understand or apply the parables would serve to confirm his rejection of God’s forgiveness.
3. C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (Uhrichsville, Ohio: Barbour and Co., MCMXC).
4. Lobel.