

The Powerful Seed

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[0 : 00] Good morning. My name is Matthew Capone, and I'm the pastor here at Cheyenne Mountain Presbyterian Church, and it's my joy to bring God's Word to you today. A special welcome if you're new or visiting with us.

We're glad that you're here, and we're glad that you're here not because we're trying to fill seats, but because we're following Jesus together as one community, and as we follow Jesus together, we become convinced that there's no one so good. They don't need God's grace, and no one so bad that they can't have it, which is why we come back week after week to hear what God has to say to us in His Word. We're continuing our series in the Gospel of Mark, and you'll remember that the Gospels tell the story of Jesus and His life and His death and His resurrection, and we've been in Mark chapter 4. The last couple of weeks, we've looked at the topic of hearing, how important and urgent it is, and two weeks ago, we looked at the parable of the sower and the seed that showed us how the Word, that is the Bible, how God speaks to us, hits different kinds of soils. Now, this week, we're going to again come to this image of the seed, but from a quite different perspective. When we looked at it two weeks ago, we looked at the importance of the soil. We're shifting our perspective now, and we're looking not at the importance of the soil, but the power of the seed. Before, we looked at those who receive the Word, and so that's why we had many warnings about hearing that we would receive it well. This week, we look not at those who receive the Word, but at those who sow the Word. And in fact, that is all of us in some way if we speak about God and His ways. That is all of us in some way as we live out our faith. Now, you might feel as you live life as a Christian that your efforts are at times futile and powerless. You see the work, you feel it, but you don't see the results that you want.

You see it in parenting, in your job, in your work, in the ministry, in ways you serve, in church, you're laboring hard in relationships with friends and family, and you wonder if anything is actually happening. If what you do and say matters in any way, or if it's just words that go away on the wind, and if you're wasting all your time, maybe you feel crushed, and you believe that making things happen is all up to you. If that's true, thankfully, our passage this morning is going to address those things. And so I invite you to turn now to Mark chapter 4. We're starting at verse 26. You can turn in your worship guide. You can turn in your Bible. You can turn on your phone. No matter how you read, remember that this is God's Word. And God tells us that His Word is more precious than gold, even the finest gold, and it's sweeter than honey, even honey that comes straight from the honeycomb.

And so that's why we read now, starting at verse 26. 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. I invite you to pray with me as we come to this portion of God's Word.

Our Father in heaven, we thank you again that you speak to us, that you explain things to us, Father, that you teach us. We ask that you would remind us not to take that for granted, and we ask that you would do that this morning by your Spirit, that you would help us to understand and to hear your Word, and you would use your Word in a powerful way to encourage us, to challenge us, and most of all, to see the glory and greatness of Jesus Christ. We ask all these things in His name. Amen.

[4 : 14] In late 2019, Netflix came out with this docuseries called Inside Bill's Brain, Decoding Bill Gates.

And the goal of the series was to try to understand Bill, and so it dives into his childhood, and his marriage, and his current projects. And in episode one, we find out that Bill and his wife at the time,

Melinda, have read this article from the New York Times about how children in the third world are dying because sewage is making its way into drinking water. And so Bill, being incensed by this, gets to work trying to figure out how to set up sanitation and sewer systems in the third world. It turns out you can't simply import what we do here. He has to invent something entirely new, and so they go off on this journey of trying to figure out how they can make this work. Bill ends up calling a mechanical engineer by the name of Peter Janicki to help him. And about 30 minutes into this episode, we see Janicki is next to this pile of sewer sludge, and in the midst of this sludge, you see some plants starting to sprout up. And he turns to the camera as he's pushing around this sludge with his shovel, and he says this. He says, so this is a sewer sludge. What do you think's growing in there? And he answers his own question, tomatoes. You know why? Because people eat tomatoes. And the seeds go through the person, and they end up here. I mentioned this this morning not because I want to talk about poop, but instead because there is something miraculous and impressive going on here. There are seeds that can survive the human digestive system. They survive the journey to the sewer. And after all those things, they are still able to take root and sprout. Seeds are powerful and resilient and relentless, and at times slow and small and unseen, and they are unstoppable. Mark is telling us here the same thing. Jesus is telling us in this parable that the same thing is true of God's kingdom and his word. The kingdom is like a seed. It is also powerful, resilient, relentless. It is not going to give up. [6 : 50] And so that's what we see in this story. First in verse 26, this man comes and scatters the seed on the ground, but we find out that's the last thing he really has to do with it. The seed takes on a life of its own. Verse 27, he sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows. He knows not how.

Verse 28 adds on, the earth produces by itself. Jesus is telling us that when and as the kingdom comes, the batteries are included.

It comes with its own power, its own resources. Now, I want us for a minute to return to the meaning of the kingdom of God as we're talking about this. It's easy when we come to phrases like the kingdom of God to give in what some people call God talk, which is a way of saying everyone says it, no one has any idea what in the world it means. So I want us to pause for a second and remind ourselves what we are talking about when we talk about the kingdom of God. First, very simply, the kingdom of God is the place where Jesus is obeyed and followed as king.

The kingdom of God is the place where Jesus is king. We see the kingdom in part now. We will one day see it fully, which is another way of saying not everyone in this world recognizes and serves Jesus as king.

One day they will. Bible tells us that a day is coming when every knee will bow. And so right now we see the kingdom of God as it expresses itself in the hearts and the lives of God's people.

[8 : 44] In fact, I'm stealing that phrase from the last sentence on page five of your worship guide. I have this long quote from Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones helping us understand what the kingdom of God is.

And it ends with that phrase, he is certainly ruling in that way in the hearts and lives of all his people. And so the kingdom grows when our obedience and following of Jesus as king increases. The kingdom grows as more and more people recognize Jesus in that way. We prayed earlier this morning that God's kingdom would come on earth as it is in heaven. And we see that as we here and others worship and love and obey God more and more.

Now I'll tell you, I've spent a lot of time trying to figure out the right way to speak about the kingdom of God, the most helpful way to articulate it. And I cannot commend any quote more to you than the one I have on page five.

That is the best explanation of the kingdom of God that I have found. So I'm not going to dive deep into all of it, but feel free to take your worship guide home with you and have that as a resource.

[9 : 51] So that's what we're talking about. When we're talking about the seed in the kingdom of growing, we're talking about the rule of Jesus as king in this world, seen now in the hearts and lives of his people.

And so with that, we're going to jump right back in. And remember verse 26, we're talking about the kingdom of God as a man scattering a seed. And the opposite way of saying it is this.

It is not the skill or power of the man who scatters the seed. That is not ultimately what matters. In fact, here, the independent growth of the seed is juxtaposed with the lack of involvement of the sower. The sower does almost nothing except throw out the seed.

And so the point is this. The kingdom of God has its own internal power. The kingdom of God does not ultimately or fundamentally grow by human effort.

[10:54] It is not us who have the power, but instead God and his kingdom and his word. And so that's why over the years I've become more and more precise and careful in the language that I use.

You may hear often when I pray, I pray that God would use us or others as his instruments. Because instrument language recognizes where the true and ultimate power actually lies. It is not in the instrument, but in the one who uses it. And so we're recognizing as we pray those prayers that God is the one who is at work in the world. Now as we think about this, in light of verses 1 through 20, the parable of the different kinds of soil, we might think that Jesus here is contradicting himself.

It seemed at the beginning of chapter 4 that it was the soil that really mattered. Now it sounds like it's actually the seed that really matters. Now Jesus is not contradicting himself here, and he's just giving us different perspectives on the same reality.

1 through 20 was meant to challenge those who receive the word, who hear it. Verses 26 through 29 are meant to encourage those who sow the word.

[12:10] 1 through 20 is meant to challenge those who hear the word. 26 through 29 is meant to encourage and free up those who sow the word. And so it's two different perspectives on the same reality.

It's encouragement here for parents and grandparents and workers and teachers and friends and soldiers who show up day after day. In fact, it's encouragement for anyone who speaks to another person about God and his ways and the gospel.

When we come and open up the scriptures, we want two things to happen. We want to be challenged by God's word, and we want to be encouraged by God's word. And of course, as I prayed this morning, most of all, we want to see Jesus.

The last few weeks, we've had many challenges and warnings from God's word. This week, we come with great encouragement and bread for the journey. Because it reminds us that growth does not depend upon us.

And so this is good news for all sorts of people as we work as Christians in this world. It's encouragement for parents and grandparents. And the reason I say grandparents is I know that many of you here, while technically you are grandparents, functionally you act as parents.

[13:25] Because of things that have or are happening in your children's lives. And you want your children and your grandchildren to know and love God. And you're tempted to think that if you can just get it right, they will.

And there's an anxiety and a fear and a crushing burden of believing that it is up to you. Afraid of messing up, knowing you have never done enough.

This passage reminds us, you are simply scattering seed. The sower, verse 27, sleeps and rises night and day.

Maybe you feel like that. You get up, you make it through the day. Hopefully you get some sleep. You're not sure quite what's happening. And the seed still grows without you.

When you go to sleep at night, as a parent or a grandparent, God does not. God is still at work. Psalm 121 tells us this.

[14:33] He will not let your foot be moved. He who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. God doesn't take naps.

God doesn't get up in the morning because he didn't go to bed. And if God is not at work, if he wasn't at work in the past and he isn't at work now, there is nothing you can do that will be enough. If God wasn't at work in the past, if he's not at work now, there is nothing that you can do that will ever be enough. The decisive and determining factor is not the sower.

It is the seed. My parents, like all parents everywhere, imperfect and flawed.

And they got two fundamental, critical things right. First, they stayed married, which is not a small thing.

[15:43] Second, they took us to church every single Sunday. They put us in the presence of the word. They exposed us to the power of the word.

You are actually not powerful enough to change the hearts and minds of your children and grandchildren. God is. All that you can do is what you can do.

You scatter the seed. Day after day. And as you sleep, it grows. Maybe you're single. You're not married now.

And you don't know if you will ever be. Maybe you're married and you don't have kids. And you still work day after day to see God's kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.

In classrooms, in boardrooms, on Zoom calls, with clients and trainings and at meals. And you speak words of life from the Bible to those around you.

[16 : 48] The promise from Isaiah chapter 55 that we read this morning, that John read for us, is still true for you. God's word will not return to him void.

God's kingdom is growing and it is coming. God does not need you to be married or have children for his kingdom to be at work in you and through you. The seed is growing.

For us in this church, as we push back as one community against the kingdom of darkness, there are all kinds of challenges that we face. Our elders have had their share of sleepless nights from time to time.

As we have fought various trials or spiritual battles that go on for months, at times even years. And we continue in prayer and move forward. And we're not sure if anything is happening or if it makes a difference.

The churches I grew up in were perpetually unhealthy and dysfunctional. More churches than not that I've been in have been churches with poor teaching and even worse leadership.

[18 : 04] Multiple leaders from those churches are not in ministry anymore. Some of them, I'm not sure if they were ever Christians. Those churches got many things wrong. And they got one thing right.

They opened up the word of God every Sunday. And God honored the preaching of his word as imperfect as it was.

God used that preaching here in my life to bring me to be here this morning. They scattered the seed.

God was still at work. The kingdom was powerful. As we live as people in this wicked and crooked world, knowing what Paul says in Philippians chapter 2, that we're in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation.

Perhaps as we realize that, and the longer we live in this world, the more we want to repeat the cry that comes at the end of Revelation chapter 22, verse 20, where the man says, Amen, come Lord Jesus.

[19 : 10] As we look around the world and we see countries that are discouraging and dark where Christians are persecuted, as we hear this week that open doors just declare that Afghanistan is the most dangerous place to be a Christian, we know no matter what, the kingdom continues to grow.

Without God's power, it does not matter what you and I do. Without God's power, our work is worthless and weak and futile.

With God's power, our work is greater than the sum of its parts because we know that God is in it. Maybe verse 27 feels like your life.

You get up, you go to bed, hopefully you get a few hours of sleep, you're scattering seed, you're not sure if anything is happening, you can know one thing, the seed is sprouting.

Not because of you, because of him. Our confidence is and only is in God. Psalm 127 reminds us, Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.

[20 : 45] Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil, for he gives to his beloved sleep.

In the midst of our sin and weakness and failures and imperfection, God honors the scattering of his word. God continues to grow his kingdom.

The seed can spring up in sewer sludge and it can survive and pass through someone's digestive system. The bottom line, brothers and sisters, is this. As we work and play in this world, our ultimate hope is not that we would have the right strategies and techniques, because we will always disappoint and fall short.

Our ultimate hope is this, the inexhaustible power of God. That is what we hope in.

We are believing that God honors his promise in Isaiah 55, that his word will not return to him void. If our ultimate hope is in our skill or in our faithfulness, we are doomed.

[22 : 02] The determining factor here is not the excellence or skill of the sower. It is in the power of the seed. Yes, the skill of the sower matters, but, and, it is not the ultimate or determining factor.

God is. The sower doesn't really know what's going on. He's getting up and going to bed day after day.

Your hope is not that you'll get it right, because you won't. Part of legalism is believing that we're capable of engineering and controlling and guaranteeing outcomes through rules and behavior.

And I am not saying that faithfulness doesn't matter. Our faithfulness is not our ultimate hope. It is not the catalytic power at work in this world.

Instead, we look and hope in the power of God. You may not see the return for your labor for a long time.

[23 : 14] You may not ever see it on this side of heaven. It may feel at times futile and pointless. And we believe Jesus' words that the kingdom is growing.

In the midst of our failures and imperfections and sin, God honors the scattering of his word. God creates the growth of his kingdom. God is at work using flawed and imperfect, sinful men and women as his instruments in this world as he brings redemption to bear.

Fruit grows without the help of the sower. And so, brothers and sisters, we take tremendous hope and confidence and humility from God's word.

We recognize that we can't always see and understand God's purposes and his plan. We don't always know what's going on. And we have faith that God does.

We keep moving. And we keep sowing. We're told something else about the kingdom here at the very end in verse 29.

[24 : 29] I mentioned earlier that the kingdom is here in part. It is not here in full. And one day it will be. Verse 29 gives us this process, the steps, the stages of what happens.

But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle because the harvest has come. Yes, the growth of God's kingdom is slow and unseen, and there is an end state.

Harvest time is coming. This is what the Old Testament refers to as the day of the Lord. The kingdom one day will be fully grown and completely dominant.

Yes, on the one hand, it is slow, and on the other hand, it is inevitable. Mark is quoting from the Old Testament. It's a direct quote of Joel 3, verse 13, which says this, Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe.

Go in, tread, for the winepress is full. The vats overflow, for their evil is great. And so in the midst of a passage of hope, Mark and Jesus here allude to a passage about judgment.

[25 : 49] In other words, there is a limited time to recognize Jesus as king. There is a limited time to enter the kingdom.

And as I've told you many times, there is no one who knows the day or the hour of his death. Now is the time to recognize Jesus as king.

Now is the time to submit to him. Now is the time to enter the kingdom. In fact, Jesus speaks many times in the gospels, especially the gospel of Matthew, about entering into the kingdom, which is a way of talking about seeing and recognizing Jesus' rule in this world.

If you have questions about that or want to learn more, I direct you, as I have before, to page 10 of our worship guide, which talks about what it means to recognize Jesus as king and follow him into his kingdom.

Because the time to follow Jesus as king is now. But when the grain is ripe at once, he puts in the sickle because the harvest has come.

[27 : 04] Just because the kingdom grows slowly does not mean it will come in fullness one day. No, in fact, it is. The sickle will show up. Judgment day is coming.

There will be a time where we finally see the fruit of all our efforts, the way in which God used us as his instruments in this world to bring about his redemption. And we long and look forward to that time.

And so I urge you, matter of greatest importance for you in this world is whether Jesus is your king or not.

Because the kingdom is coming in fullness. He will be the king over everyone. Will you recognize him? Will you follow him? Will you worship him in time?

Will you worship him in time? The time is now. In a series of articles from 2005 to 2015, National Geographic track, this palm tree named Methuselah.

[28 : 12] And the reason they named the palm tree Methuselah, you may know if you're a Bible nerd, that Methuselah shows up in Genesis chapter 5. He's the oldest person recorded in the Bible. Now, this tree was actually not old. It was planted in 2005, but the seed was. The seed was one of three seeds that were recovered by archaeologists in the 1960s from a pile of rubble at the ancient site of Masada in Judea.

And Carbon Dating says these seeds were about 2,000 years old. In other words, this is a seed from the time of Jesus in the place of Jesus in Judea.

And Israeli researchers finally worked to germinate it and bring it to life 2,000 years after it had been stored away. One of the researchers in charge of this, her name was Elaine Solowee, said this, I assume the food and the seed would be no good after all that time.

How could it be? There was a follow-up article in 2015, 10 years later. National Geographic came back to it and Elaine had changed her tune.

[29 : 24] She said this, Brothers and sisters, we also have a seed from 2,000 years ago that continues to be full of power and bear fruit in this world.

It is the good news of the gospel that Jesus has come, as we saw in Mark 1, verses 14 and 15, that the kingdom of God is at hand. It is time to repent and believe.

The word of God is the seed that continues to bear fruit generation to generation. 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. Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we praise you and thank you that our hope is not in ourselves, but it is in you. We thank you that your kingdom does not rise or fall on us, but it grows day and night while we rise and sleep. We ask that you would use it to encourage us, remind us of your grace in our lives, that we would love you and your kingdom, and we would follow you as king.

[30 : 53] We ask all these things in the mighty name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.