

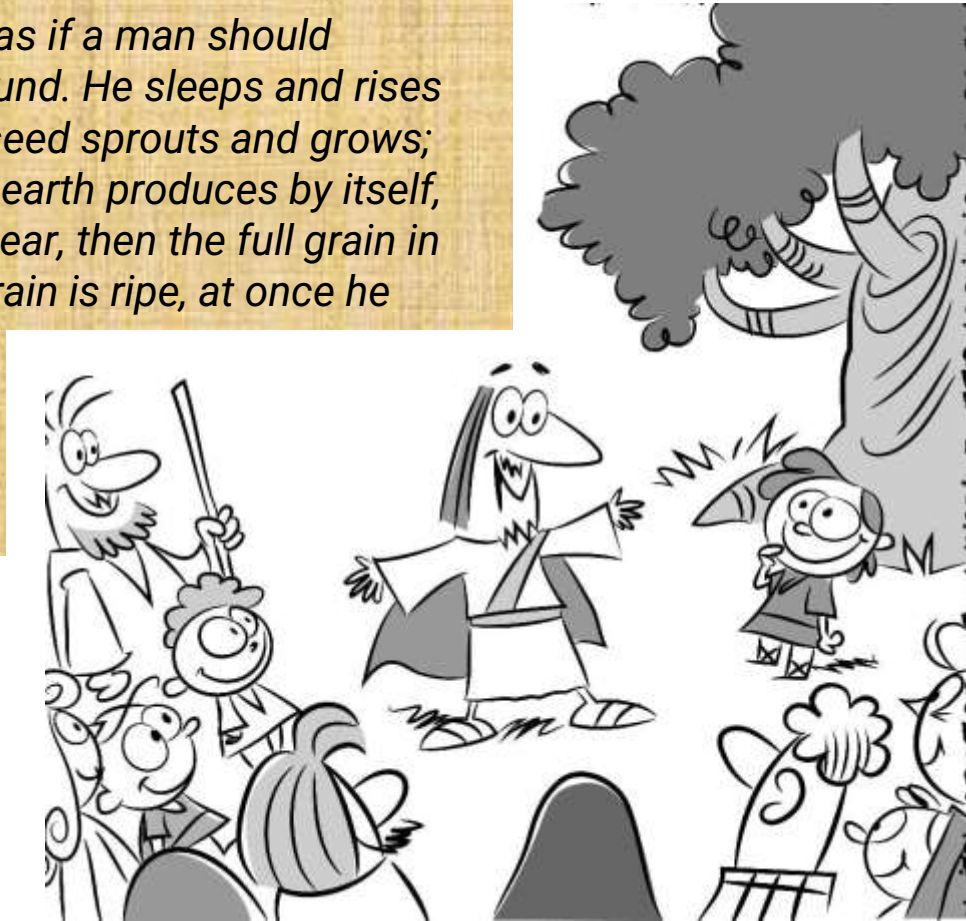
# The Seeds and the Leaven

Jesus used a number of parables to teach about different aspects of the kingdom of God, The first parable, sometimes called “The Growing Seed,” which is only told in the Gospel of Mark, is as follows:

*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.*  
(Mark 4:26–29)

In this parable, Jesus was comparing the kingdom to the process of seeds being sown, coming to fruition, and then being harvested. The

point of the parable is not to accuse the farmer of being lazy and doing nothing, or of not being knowledgeable of farming practices. Rather it's pointing out that during the time between the sowing and the harvesting, while the farmer's actions are helpful, they aren't what make the seeds grow. He waits for the seed to go through the various stages of growth until it comes to fruition.





The seed—in this case a wheat seed—grows on its own, taking time to first push through the ground as a blade, then the ear of wheat is formed, and eventually it matures and is ready for harvest. The full process that brings the plant to fruition takes time, and nothing that the farmer does, other than sowing the seed, causes the actual process to happen. The rain, the elements of the earth, the life within the seed, all products of God’s creation, are behind the growth of the seed. Once the seed is planted, it successfully fulfills its intended purpose. When it’s fully grown, it’s then harvested.

What point is Jesus making about the kingdom when He tells His listeners this parable? He’s explaining that the kingdom is like a process of growth which moves automatically toward fruition and harvest. The farmer’s inactivity shows the marking of time—he sleeps, he wakes, day after day, and during that time the seed grows on its own. Eventually when the grain is ripe he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.

Harvesting the grain with the sickle points to judgment, and in this case future judgment, one that comes after the harvest is in full bloom. In

another parable, Jesus said:

*The harvest is the close of the age, and the reapers are angels. (Matthew 13:39)*

Jesus tells this parable to convey the point that the kingdom of God is steadily coming into being, apart from human efforts to either bring it about or to oppose it. The focus of the parable is the seed—its steady growth to the blade, the formation of the fruit, and eventually to the time of its harvest. It's a process which takes time, but which steadily moves forward day by day. The farmer knows that once he plants the seed, there is nothing he can do to make the process move faster. He also knows with certainty that the seed will produce fruit, and when it does, there will be a time of harvest.

To understand the point Jesus was making, it helps to remember that He was speaking to people who were witnesses to His ministry—both His disciples and those who were gathering to hear Him—people who had Jewish expectations about the Messiah's mission. They anticipated a king or ruler who would rise up and break the shackles of the oppressors, the Roman rulers, and would restore the kingdom of Israel to its past glory.



Jesus was preaching the kingdom of God, but the kingdom He preached wasn't meeting the standard expectations of the people of that time. He was healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, even raising the dead, but He wasn't confronting the political situation. There was no sign that He was moving toward the overthrow of Roman power. It's possible that the excitement among some of those who originally welcomed His message was beginning to wane. Some may have been questioning His message and method, to the point that, as John's Gospel tells us,

*Many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. (John 6:66)*



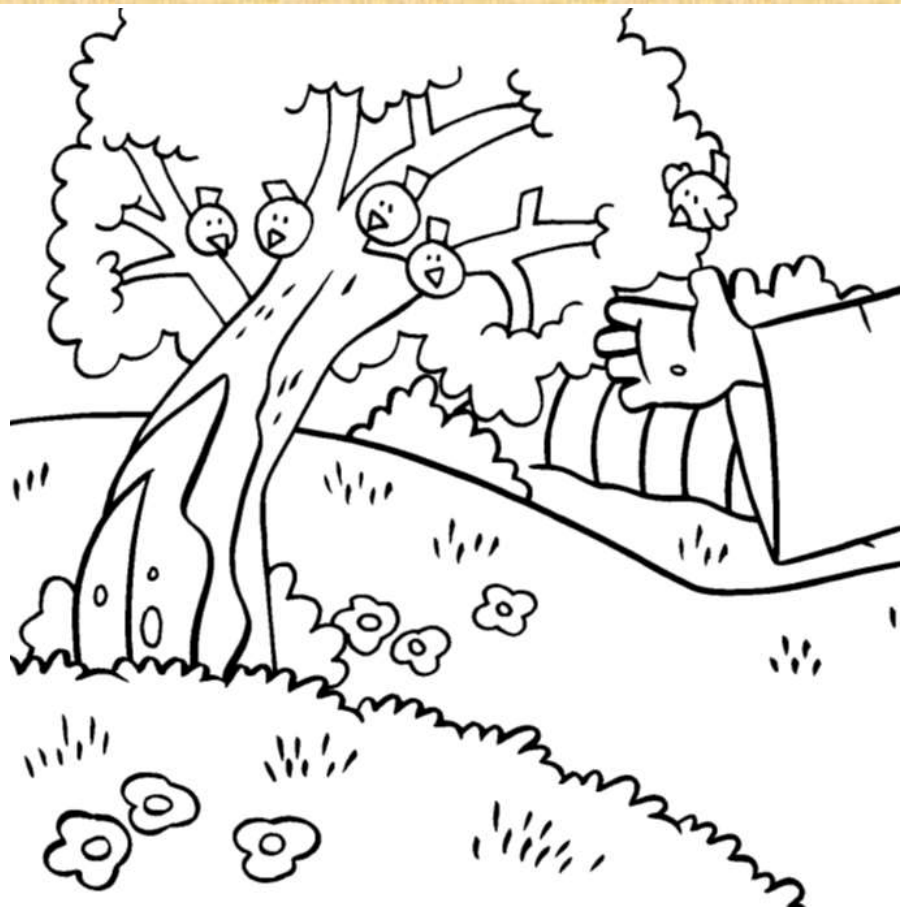
Some clearly questioned if Jesus could be the Messiah, since their expectations were not being fulfilled. In this parable, Jesus was making the point that the listeners needed both to expand their understanding of the kingdom and allow for the passing of time for it to be fully in effect. The kingdom, like the seed, takes time to go through the full process from sowing to harvest. It requires time to come to fruition, but when it does, the harvest will certainly come.

Through two other parables, Jesus makes a similar point. The first is the parable of "The Mustard Seed," which is told in all three of the Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Matthew relates it like this:

*The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches. (Matthew 13:31–32)*

Calling the mustard seed the smallest of all seeds was in alignment with the Jewish and Greco-Roman proverbial use of mustard seeds to denote something as very tiny. It doesn't mean that there are no smaller seeds in existence. There are. But this seed was the smallest sown by farmers in that day. Most commentators identify the seed in question as a black mustard seed (*Brassica Nigra*). This



tiny seed produces a large plant which grows to the height of 8–12 feet (2.5–3.5 meters), which is as tall as some trees. The size of the plant allows for birds to make nests in its branches, thus it fulfills the function of a tree. Jesus uses the parable to contrast the tiny seed with the tall bush that comes from it.

In likening the kingdom to the mustard seed, Jesus makes the point that though the kingdom He is preaching is presently minuscule, it will grow enormously compared to its beginning. He's contrasting the size of the tiny seed and the size of the end result.

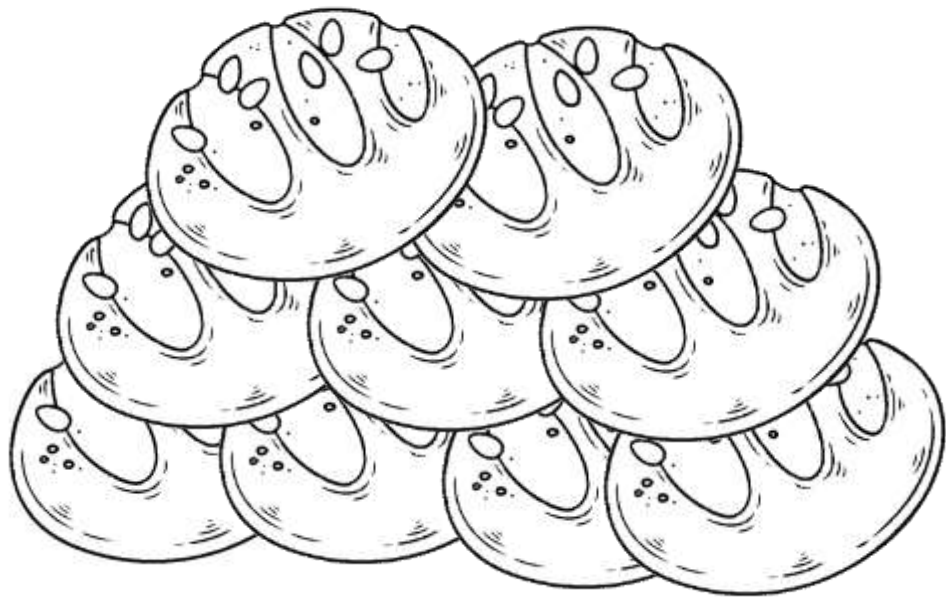
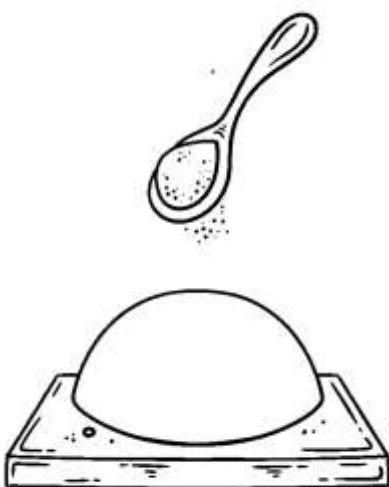
In the third parable, told by both Matthew and Luke, Jesus makes a similar point. Let's listen to what He says:

*The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened. (Matthew 13:33)*

In the parable, the amount of flour the woman was using (three measures) was enough to make about one hundred and fifty loaves of bread—quite a large amount. To the dough she added a small piece of leaven and let it sit, likely overnight, allowing it enough time to rise. During that time, the small amount of leaven affected all of the dough and caused it to double or triple in size.

Like the previous parable, this one shows that over time the small beginnings of Jesus' ministry would result in great growth and expansion of the kingdom.

Like the parable of "The Mustard Seed," this parable tells of the growth process of the kingdom; that something surprisingly large will grow from something very small.



Today we can see the truth of these parables. In the years after Jesus' death and resurrection, the kingdom slowly began to grow. It didn't

meet the limited expectation that those of Jesus' day looked forward to; instead it has spread throughout the entire world. The small beginnings have over time grown far beyond the expectations of that day. As surely as the kingdom has expanded due to the "seeds" sown in Jesus' time, so can we be sure it will continue to grow until the time of harvest. As the kingdom has consistently grown, as Jesus alluded to in these parables, so too we are assured that the time will come when the harvest will be reaped.

It is one of our jobs as Christians to continue to spread the message of the kingdom, to share the good news and invite others to enter God's kingdom through coming to know Jesus and receiving Him as their Savior so that they too can have newness of life. Each generation of Christians, from the time of Jesus until now, has shared the news of the kingdom with others, thus doing their part to ensure the growth and continuance of the kingdom beyond their lifetime. It is our responsibility to do the same.

May we each do our part, so that His kingdom will expand in the lives of those around us. May we each be part of the fulfillment of the message of these stories that Jesus told.

