

Mark Chapter Four

Colour-code summary: the four main ways God speaks to us through the Gospels...

Blue = something about Jesus' uniqueness and Lordship that shows he is worthy of our devotion, trust and surrender

Green = something about Jesus' character or ministry that we can imitate

Red = something Jesus taught that we can understand or apply to our lives

Orange = insights we can apply based on the way various people responded to him

THE KINGDOM COMES DEPENDING ON OUR RESPONSIVENESS (4:1-25)

The parable of the sower

1 Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge. 2 He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: 3 "Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. 4 As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. 5 Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. 6 But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. 7 Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. 8 Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times."

9 Then Jesus said, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."

- **If you're a teacher, more often use some of Jesus' teaching methods.**
 - On his ministry trips from Capernaum, Jesus would heal bodies, but he was more interested in changing lives. That's why he wouldn't just heal, he would also teach the crowds. He again went out onto a boat (v1) and used it as his platform to teach the people on the shore (see 3:9).
 - He used to teach in parables (v2). The word means "to put down two things side by side". Jesus would often put down something natural that existed in everyday life and use it to draw out a spiritual meaning. He would start with something known and then move people onto something unknown.
 - The Gospels use the word "parable" to refer to anything that was not straightforward and literal in the teachings of Jesus. It includes allegories (like the one mentioned in these verses (v2-8)), sayings, stories that illustrate a spiritual truth, and questions to make us think. It's the opposite of ordinary, straightforward teaching.
 - Jesus was a master communicator. He would take people from what was known to what was not yet known. He would use the natural to introduce people to the spiritual. He would penetrate people's hearts and consciences by speaking with pictures. He

would ask questions, and often responded to questions with questions. He would capture truth in one-liner sayings that would then play around in the hearer's mind, having a long-term impact.

- It's interesting that today we most commonly answer questions rather than ask questions, and we speak rationally around the facts, rather than speak to the heart with stories. We would do well to imitate some of Jesus' teaching methods.

10 When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. 11 He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables 12 so that,

" 'they may be ever seeing but never perceiving,
and ever hearing but never understanding;
otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!' [a]"

- **Your responsiveness (or lack of it) determines how much Jesus is willing to reveal of himself and his kingdom to you.**
 - There were two kinds of people according to Jesus. First, there were those on the inside, which consisted of those who were his disciples, who showed a deep interest in him as well as a willingness to do God's will (as 3:35 puts it). They are here described as "the Twelve and the others around him" (v10). And then there were those on the outside (v10), who showed a superficial interest in Jesus. Insiders were willing to have their lives impacted by Jesus, whereas outsiders were not.
 - It seems that Jesus spoke in parables as a way of separating the insiders from the outsiders. To the insiders he would give the meaning of the parables (as he is about to in verses 14-20), but he wouldn't explain the meaning to the outsiders.
 - But why does he withhold the meaning from the outsiders? His answer is to quote Isaiah 6:9: "They may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!" These words are often misunderstood to mean that Jesus is saying, "I don't want to tell them the meaning just in case they believe, and I wouldn't want that to happen." This is, of course, not the right interpretation. Rather what he means with these words is, "Though these people see and hear my message, they fail to understand it and receive its benefit in their lives." In other words, Jesus doesn't tell them the meaning of his parables, because it would be wasted entirely on them. They are blind and deaf to God and nothing he could do or say, for now at least, could change that. He wasn't trying to blind them to the meaning of the parables. He was suggesting they were already blind. When we think that so many of the people who had already been exposed to his teachings and deeds were ready to kill him (3:6) and had even accused him of insanity

(3:21) and demon-possession (3:22), we understand that many of these people were spiritually blind and deaf.

- The point is that Jesus is more likely to reveal himself and the deep meaning of his teachings to people who “have ears to hear” than he is to people who don’t (v9). Our level of responsiveness determines how much Jesus is willing to reveal to us. This same truth is echoed in John 7:17 where Jesus says, “Anyone who is willing to do God’s will will be able to discern whether my teaching is my own or whether it really comes from God.” In other words, our ability to receive revelation from Jesus is determined by our *prior* willingness to be impacted by it.

13 Then Jesus said to them, “Don’t you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? 14 The farmer sows the word. 15 Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. 16 Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. 17 But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. 18 Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; 19 but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. 20 Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown.”

- **The way you respond to what Jesus is saying to you determines how much your life will be impacted by him.**
 - There are four ways to receive the message of what God is doing in Jesus: with a closed heart, a careless heart, a crowded heart or a cultivated heart. We should make sure we are the fourth kind.
 - Verse 14 says, “The farmer sows the word.” The farmer is whoever communicates God’s message, whether it’s God himself, Jesus or any other person. The “word” that the farmer was sowing (preaching) probably refers to Jesus’ main message to the people which is recorded in 1:15: “The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news.” The word is essentially the good news that “God is doing something new in Jesus, and you’re invited to get in on it”. See the commentary under 1:14,15 to understand why this is an apt summary of Jesus’ good news to the world.
 - Jesus explains that this good news - that God is doing something new in the world - will have varying effects on people who hear it. He speaks of four kinds of people (whom he compares to four kinds of soil).
 - 1) Some people immediately forget the good news (v15). Although they hear it, it fails to penetrate them in anyway. Satan keeps them from receiving it. These people have *closed* hearts.

- 2) Some people happily receive the message but in a very shallow, temporary way (v16,17). They hear it, and are happy about it. It seems like they have responded, but the test of time and trouble quickly show that they haven't really received the message at all - it never really took root in their lives. These people have *careless* hearts.
- 3) Some people do genuinely receive the message, but they fail to bear the fruit of the message in their lives because of distractions and wrong priorities (v18,19). The kingdom does take root to a degree in this person's life, but they fail to give this new plant of what God is doing in their life the priority it deserves - and instead focus their lives on worries, wealth and all the good things this world provides. These people have *crowded* hearts.
- 4) Some people receive the message and give themselves to cultivating the new thing God is doing in their life through Jesus, and produce great fruitfulness (v20). These people have *cultivated* hearts.

The parable of the lamp

21 He said to them, "Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don't you put it on its stand? 22 For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. 23 If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear."

- Mark 4:1 tells us about Jesus' teaching from the boat on the water's edge on a certain day. Jesus told his first parable (v1-9). Then Mark breaks from the flow of Jesus' message, and inserts verses 10-20 in which Jesus later explained the meaning of this first parable to his disciples. However, verse 21-32 tells us the content of the rest of his teaching on the lake, which consists of several other parables.
- **It is spiritual blindness (and not God's unwillingness to reveal Christ) that explains why so many people have failed to see the light of Christ.**
 - God has nothing to hide. He has the power to reveal Jesus. God has always had plans to reveal his Son, the Messiah, to the world as its true king. This started at his baptism (1:11). But then slowly but surely God reveals this to people. In the course of Jesus' ministry more and more people would come to realize who he was. Then, after Jesus ascended to heaven, even more people would come to understand who Jesus is. Ultimately, everyone will acknowledge that Jesus is heaven and earth's true king (but many of them will realise it too late) (see Philippians 2:9-11).
 - Jesus is telling this parable to let insiders know that God is not keeping this secret at all. God has no reason to hide Christ from the world.
 - Then why do so few people see the light of Christ? The answer Jesus has been giving in these lake parables is that the poor

responsiveness of unbelieving human hearts has blinded them to the reality of Christ. That's why he repeats the line he said in verse 9 again here in verse 23: "He who has ears to hear, let them hear."

24 "Consider carefully what you hear," he continued. "With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more. 25 Those who have will be given more; as for those who do not have, even what they have will be taken from them."

- **The measure of your responsiveness determines God's measure of revelation to you.**
 - Verses 24-25 are really a further explanation of the parable of the lamp mentioned in verses 21-23.
 - Jesus is urging the crowd and his disciples to listen carefully to his teachings. He is hoping that they respond to it with their full attention.
 - What does Jesus mean by "with the measure you use, it will be measured to you" (v24)? Given the context, he means, "The measure of responsiveness with which you listen to me, is the measure of revelation of myself and my teachings I can give you." He even uses the phrase "and even more" (v24) to say that he gives us more revelation than our responsiveness deserves.
 - What does Jesus mean by verse 25? He is saying that those who have a revelation of Christ and his kingdom will continue to grow in their revelation, whereas those who have failed to receive any revelation of Christ and his kingdom will lose even the very little they have.
 - We need to note that we're either increasing or decreasing our current level of revelation. In the words of Michael Eaton, "No one stays stationary in the kingdom of God. Either they are increasing or decreasing in their experience of Christ's blessing."

THE KINGDOM COMES BECAUSE GOD SOVEREIGNLY WILLS IT (4:26-34)

The parable of the growing seed

26 He also said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. 27 Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. 28 All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. 29 As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come."

- **Christ's kingdom supernaturally results in spiritual growth in your life.**
 - In verse 13 Jesus suggested that the first parable (the one about the sower) was the key to understanding all the other parables.

Because of this we know that the “seed” mentioned here (v26) is the message of the kingdom. It is the “word from God” that announces the new thing God is doing in the world through Jesus. In a broader sense, the seed represents the Bible and its entire message.

- This parable describes the impact of the word of God on our lives. It tells us how the kingdom comes in our lives, and how spiritual growth happens. We notice a few things:
- 1) *God’s word is like a seed that produces life in us.* It’s not our ability to nurture that life through watering and cultivation that’s the main thing (although, of course, this helps). Primarily, spiritual growth happens in us because of the power and the life resident in the word itself. The seed is the source of the life. Peter, one of the disciples would later echo this teaching of Christ by saying, “You have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God” (1 Peter 1:23).
- 2) *Spiritual growth is a mystery.* In verse 27 it says that growth happens “though he does not know how”. We cannot analyze and explain spiritual growth, we can only observe that it’s happening. We must never take a mechanical approach to spiritual growth as if the law of cause and effect explains everything. It doesn’t. God’s work in our lives is largely mysterious.
- 3) *Spiritual growth happens all by itself.* The opening three words of verse 28 say, “All by itself.” The Greek word is “automatos” from where we get the word “automatically”. Although we can do what we can to nurture and cultivate the life of God at work in our lives, we cannot create or control it. The life of God in us has a life of its own.
- 4) *Spiritual growth in us will eventually be obvious to all (v29).* The seed first produces a tiny, easily overlooked plant, but eventually the plant is fully developed and ready for harvest. Its grain can even be enjoyed by others. Similarly, God works in our lives slowly but surely, so that though many may overlook what God is doing in our lives at first, eventually it will be impossible to miss.

The parable of the mustard seed

30 Again he said, “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? 31 It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. 32 Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.”

- **Christ’s kingdom will ultimately become the greatest reality of history.**
 - Jesus’ question in verse 30 seems to be a deliberate echo of Isaiah 40:18 which says, “To whom, then will you compare God? What

picture can you compare him to?" Isaiah 40 seeks to give people a vision of how glorious God is, despite all that seems to be going wrong in the world, and despite how few people seem to know it. Similarly, Jesus in this parable wants us to get a greater vision of God and his power to rule the world and determine the course of history through the coming of his kingdom.

- Jesus made a promise in these verses that despite the smallness of his Galilean ministry, eventually the whole world would be impacted by his coming. And 2000 years later, we have seen some of the fulfilment of his promise. Jesus' life and ministry were exceptionally small-scale against the back-drop of history. Yet he came to plant the kingdom of God in history. His message was simple: "The kingdom of God is at hand - repent and believe the good news." As people began to believe this message, their lives were changed, and more and more people began to believe and experience the new thing God is doing in the world through Jesus. The world we live in is very different in many ways because Jesus came. And he's influence will not fade away. By the time Jesus comes again, the whole world will have been undeniably influenced by him.
- We can be sure that the new thing God is doing in this world will continue to grow and grow so that more and more people, and more and more cultures, will experience the wonderful shelter and fruitfulness of his kingdom.
- In this parable Jesus is again 'in code' suggesting that he is the Messiah. Ezekiel 17:23 and Daniel 4:12 both prophesied that one day the kingdom of God, ushered in by the Messiah, would be like a beautiful tree that would provide shelter and fruit for all creatures.
- In the first two parables of Mark 4 Jesus emphasized that the kingdom of God comes depending on our responsiveness to it, but in the last two parables Jesus highlights that the kingdom of God is coming regardless of our responsiveness. This is very encouraging. Ultimately, it's not our responsiveness but God's sovereign power that will get the job done of establishing his kingdom in our lives and on our planet.

33 With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. 34 He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.

- **Jesus' message was too explosive to go fully public with too soon.**
 - Jesus, especially in the early stages of his ministry, spoke in parables because his message was so explosive that it needed to be hidden until the time was right.
 - There were two kinds of people according to Jesus. First, there were those on the inside (which consisted of those who were his

disciples, who showed a deep interest in him as well as a willingness to do God's will - as 3:35 puts it). Second, there were those on the outside (v10) who showed a superficial interest in Jesus. Insiders were willing to have their lives impacted by Jesus, whereas outsiders were not.

- Jesus spoke in parables as a way of separating the insiders from the outsiders. To the insiders he would give the meaning of the parables (as he did in verses 14-20) but he wouldn't explain the meaning to the outsiders.
- But why did he do this? The first answer is given by Jesus' quote of Isaiah 6:9 (see verses 10-12 plus commentary). But there is another reason that he spoke in parables at this stage of his ministry. *It's because he didn't want to prematurely reveal himself to the crowds as the real Messiah.* We must remember that not even Jesus' disciples at this stage understood that he is the Messiah, although they might have suspected it. If word got out that he was claiming to be the king of Israel, it would be no time before king Herod, the Romans and the Jewish authorities would be trying to put an end to him. Jesus seemed to be caught in the tension of a compassionate desire to reach the multitudes, but at the same time to withhold his true identity until they were ready to hear it. In this sense, he wasn't trying to hide the meaning of his teaching from them, it was just that what he was trying to say was so explosive that saying it in parables was the only way he could say it, at this stage.
- It's fascinating that not even the insiders understood the meaning of the parables at this time. This is why in verse 11 he said, "I have given you the secret of the kingdom of God." You would think that he would say, "I have revealed to you the secret of the kingdom" but he doesn't say that. It's as though the parables were landmines being planted in the minds of the disciples, so that at a later date they would have an explosive revelation of the real meaning.

WHEN STORMS COME (4:35-41)

Jesus calms the storm

35 That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, "Let us go over to the other side." 36 Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him. 37 A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. 38 Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?"

39 He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.

40 He said to his disciples, “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?”

41 They were terrified and asked each other, “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!”

○ **Trust Christ when the storms of life come.**

- *The storms of life are inevitable (v37).* It’s interesting that it isn’t their disobedience that got them into a storm (as happened with Jonah in the Old Testament), but their obedience to Christ. Things will go wrong for obedient disciples. Jesus doesn’t promise a life of ease.
- *Christ allows storms in our lives so that we rely on him.* Listen to Spurgeon’s commentary on these verses: “I am afraid, too, that we rely too much upon ourselves. The secret of strength in faith in Christ is having no faith in ourselves. I am inclined to think that the secret of weak faith in God is our having a good deal of self-reliance; but when you cannot trust yourselves, then you hang upon Christ, and cling to him as your only hope; then you give the grip of a sinking man, and there is no hold like that.”
- *A lack of trust in Christ is shown when we forget how loving and powerful he is.* In verse 37 the disciples accuse Jesus, “Don’t you care?” We must never interpret storms as Christ’s failure to care for us. Rather we should remember just how loving and powerful he is, to care for us in the midst of the storm.
- *A lack of trust results in fear in our lives.* Jesus wasn’t disturbed by the storm itself, but rather by the effect of the storm on the disciples. He asked them, “Why are you afraid?” A lack of trust is what breeds fear in our lives. The antidote to fear is faith.
- *The key to trusting Christ is to remember his promises.* In verse 35, Jesus made an indirect promise, “Let us go over to the other side.” The disciples should have said to themselves, “It may seem like we’re going to drown, but we will never drown because Jesus said we would get to the other side.” Similarly, we need to hold onto specific promises God has given us in the Scriptures or in whatever way.
- *Another key to trusting Christ is to affirm his presence.* The reason that they should have known that their boat wouldn’t sink is that Jesus was in their boat. In the words of Marshall Morgan, “There are many Christians today who seem to think the boat is going down! I am tired of the wailing of some of my friends who take that view. The boat cannot go down. Jesus is on board.”
- *We should follow Christ’s example of faith.* Jesus slept on the boat not only because he was tired, but also because he trusted his father to look after him. And when he was awake he simply took authority over the storm.

- Christ is master of the universe.
 - Jesus alone is the Messiah and Son of God who had authority to do this (see verse 41). There's a funny but true story Gayle Erwin tells of a boat trip across the Sea of Galilee with a tour group when the wind, rain and waves began to kick up. A young man on the boat thought "What Would Jesus Do?" and stood up to rebuke the storm. When he spoke out, "Peace, be still" the rain and wind kept coming but the engine of the boat immediately cut out. I tell this humorous story to show that Jesus alone has the power to command an instant weather change.
 - Jesus was fully human. We see this in the way he falls asleep on the boat exhausted after a day of intensive teaching. But then suddenly, we see another side to Jesus. He wakes up and rules the waves. We see Christ operating in divine power. Psalm 89:9 says of God, "You rule the raging sea. When waves rise up, you still them." Christ was doing here what only God can do. Christ was fully human yet at the same time fully God. He uniquely combines compassion and power, humanity and deity.
 - Here we have an early picture of how Christ will one day wrap up human history and usher in the new heavens and the new earth. He is Lord of the universe.
 - It's fascinating that the disciples went from being afraid of the storm (v40) to being terrified of Christ himself (v41). By this stage they may have begun to suspect that he was more than a teacher (v38) and that he was also the Messiah. However, they were far from realizing that he was God in the flesh (see John 1:1 and 1:14). That revelation would come later. By now they were catching glimpses of Christ's divine power. No wonder they were terrified. Wouldn't you be terrified if someone you knew suddenly commanded the weather and it immediately obeyed?