



The Gospel of Mark

A Living Word Independent Bible Study



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Part 9

Mark 4:1-20

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Mark 4:1 (NIV)

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.

“Again Jesus began to teach by the lake”

This is now the third time, as in 2:13 and 3:7-12.

“crowd that gathered around him was so large”

Even stronger language in this reference to the crowds implies a growing following.

“got into a boat and sat in it”

Teachers would always sit, and students would typically stand.

We see this again in Matthew's Gospel, at the Sermon on the Mount:

Matthew 5:1 – “Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down.” (NIV)

The boat serves as a vantage point from which to teach a large crowd, like a “podium”

Mark 4:2 (NIV)

He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said:

“taught them many things”

About the Kingdom of God, of course.

“by parables”

Multiple parables about the Kingdom follow, in 4:3-32.

“Parable” is from Greek “para-ballo”, meaning “to throw alongside”.

Parables have a parallel meaning “thrown alongside” the first meaning.

This could be allegory, metaphor, or even riddle.

Mark 4:3 (NIV)

“Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed.”

“Listen!”

Jesus introduces the parable of the sower with a command to pay attention!

The word implies that what follows is something more than an easily understood story.

The parable is perhaps better called the “parable of the seeds” – we will see in Jesus’ interpretation later that the SEEDS are really the point of the parable.

The sower, in fact, is only introduced at the beginning.

“A farmer”

This is the actual word used for the “sower”, who is never mentioned again!

Mark 4:3-6 (NIV)

“As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up.

Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root.”

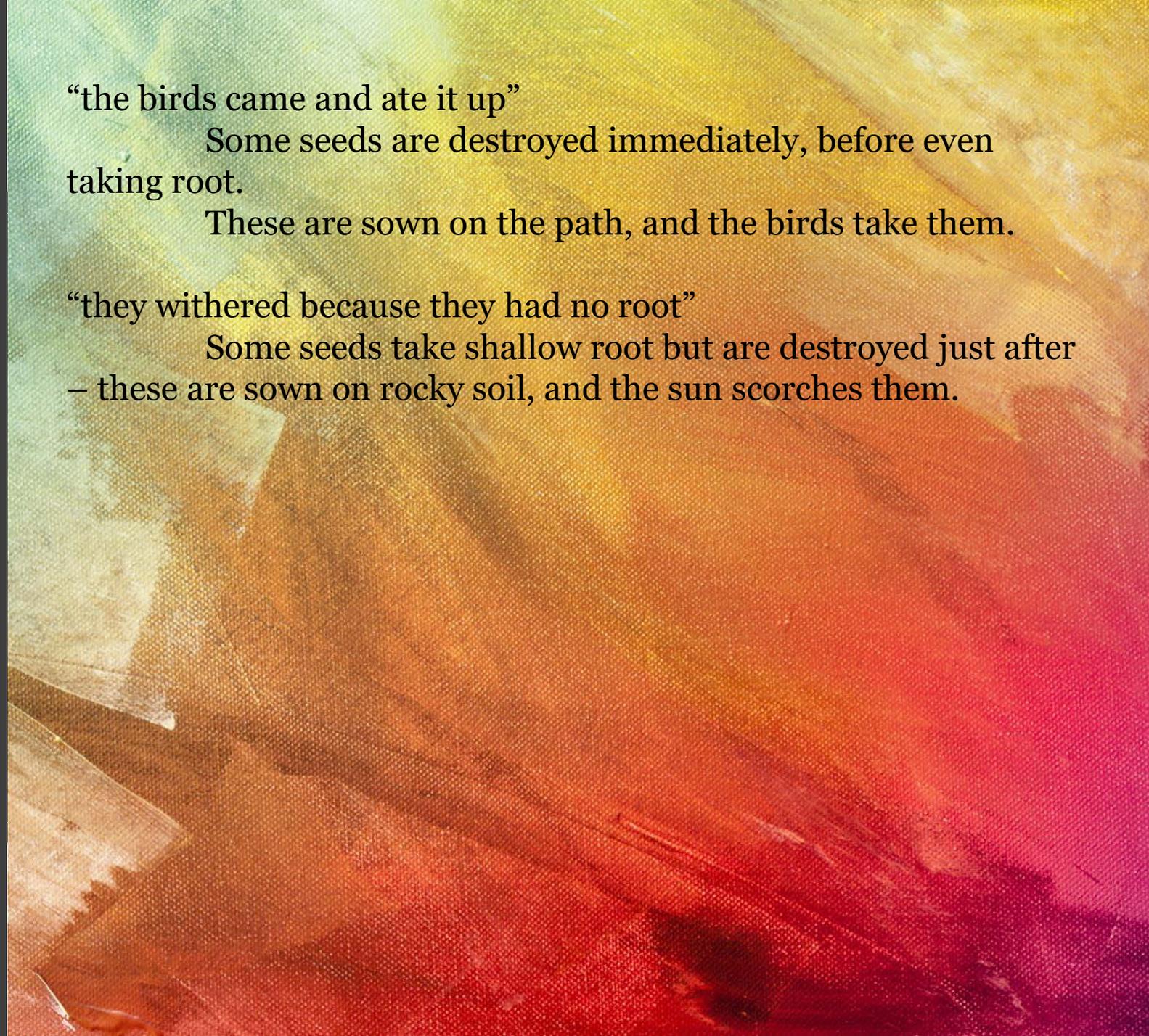
“the birds came and ate it up”

Some seeds are destroyed immediately, before even taking root.

These are sown on the path, and the birds take them.

“they withered because they had no root”

Some seeds take shallow root but are destroyed just after – these are sown on rocky soil, and the sun scorches them.



Mark 4:7-8 (NIV)

“Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, multiplying thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times.”

“choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain”

Some seeds grow among thorns but get choked out by those thorns.

“came up, grew, and produced a crop”

And some seeds grow, and thrive, in good soil.

Remember, Jesus ALWAYS teaches about the Kingdom of God so that is the focus here as well.

The full interpretation of the parable will come in 4:13-20.

However, one thing to notice from the story itself is that it implies a GRADUAL process of Kingdom coming – NOT the quick, decisive, eschatological moment the Jews expected.

Mark 4:9 (NIV)
Then Jesus said, “He
who has ears to hear,
let him hear.”

“ears to hear”

This hearkens back to the command to “Listen!”

They are familiar prophetic Old Testament words:

Jeremiah 5:21 – “Hear this, you foolish and senseless people, who have eyes but do not see, who have ears but do not hear.”

Ezekiel 12:2 – “Son of man, you are living among a rebellious people. They have eyes to see but do not see and ears to hear but do not hear, for they are a rebellious people.”

The implication is that not everyone may have “ears to hear”, or that not everyone who DOES have ears will CHOOSE to hear.

Mark 4:10 (NIV)
When he was alone, the
Twelve and the others
around him asked him
about the parables.

“When he was alone”

A private discussion interlude takes place between the parable and its interpretation.

Jesus is now with the Twelve and some others, not the entire crowd on the lakeshore.

This and the next two verses seem to be inserted in the middle of the story – verse 13 will pick up right after the parable.

There is a lack of sequential chronology here – the meaning is probably “At a later time, when he was alone”.

This implies that Mark finds it important to explain WHY Jesus taught in parables NOW, in between this first Kingdom parable and its interpretation.

This explanation continues the “insider/outsider” theme that we saw in 3:20-34, the “sandwich structure” of the scribes’ and Jesus’ family’s portrayal as “outsiders”.

Mark 4:11 (NIV)

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”

“to you ... to those on the outside”

The contrast between the disciples and “outsiders” is explicit here.

“the secret of the Kingdom of God”

This knowledge is what separates the insider from the outsider.

“Secret” translates the Greek “mysterion”, the root of our word “mystery”, but even “mystery” is not a good translation.

The word was a technical term for something unknown, but that would be revealed in the end times.

Jesus is using the language of the day to say that he is now REVEALING something about the Kingdom, unveiling the “secret” which has been hidden before now.

This is the onset of the gradual revelation of the Kingdom, as the parable of the sower points toward.

“has been given”

To be an insider is a gift from God.

Mark 4:12 (NIV)
“so that, ‘they may be
ever seeing but never
perceiving, and ever
hearing but never
understanding;
otherwise they might
turn and be forgiven!’”

This verse is a quote from Isaiah 6:9-10.

It is a difficult quote!

It seems to imply that Jesus deliberately hides meaning SO THAT outsiders can't understand or be forgiven!

But in the context of Isaiah: The Israelites had long refused God's warnings and calls to repent through the words of the prophets.

Isaiah's message would be puzzling and mysterious to the Jews in his day, as part of God's punishment for persistent rebellion – NOT simply because God wanted to exclude them.

So Jesus is using Isaiah's words to suggest that those who do not recognize or acknowledge him are analogous to those in Isaiah's day who ignored his message.

Mark 4:12 (NIV)
“so that, ‘they may be
ever seeing but never
perceiving, and ever
hearing but never
understanding;
otherwise they might
turn and be forgiven!’”

Jesus, the master teacher, uses parables that apply recognizable everyday human experience as a bridge to understanding.

He is teaching here that parables DO serve two functions:

To hide the truth from those determined to resist/reject it (as God did to the Jewish leadership in Isaiah’s day).

And to enlighten/illuminate those who have an open heart toward Jesus and the gospel, to enable them to say “yes” to God (as those who believed Isaiah did in his day).

For those who say, “I must understand everything first, then I’ll follow,” the meaning is hidden.

For those who say, “I am open to hearing from God and submitting to God first,” God will give insight into the meaning.

“so that”

Rather than “in order that”, these words often mean, simply, that this is how things are – “such that”, or “with the result that”.

The outsiders who don’t recognize God’s work in Jesus miss out on the opportunity to repent and receive forgiveness.

Mark 4:13 (NIV)

Then Jesus said to them,
“Don’t you understand
this parable? How then
will you understand
any parable?”

“Jesus said to them”

It is very rare for Jesus to offer an interpretation of a parable!

But he does so here.

“Don’t you understand”

Wait! Aren’t the disciples supposed to be among those who DO understand – who have been given the “secret of the kingdom”?

Even so, from here on, Mark portrays them as slow to perceive.

“How then will you understand”

The question implies that understanding THIS parable is significant for the ability to understand others.

Mark 4:14-15

(NIV)

“The farmer sows the word. 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.”

“sows the word”

Compare this to 4:3, “a farmer went out to sow his seed.”

“the word” = “the seed”

“word” is shorthand for the gospel throughout the New Testament.

“like seed along the path”

NOTE WELL: The metaphor shifts meaning here!

Now, the PEOPLE are the seed! Also – NOWHERE is the SOIL the point, as this parable is often described.

The parable is about the fate of the SEEDS (the people), and the SEED (the word planted), NOT the soil!

The seeds are portrayed as VICTIMS.

Now, in the shifted metaphor, the people themselves are the seed that CONTAINS the word – the seed from the FIRST metaphor!

“takes away the word”

From 4:4, this implies that the birds that take away the seed are, allegorically, Satan.

Here, Satan takes the word FROM the seed – it is SATAN’S action, not the fault of the seed (the person).

The person himself is left – but the word, the seed, is taken from him.

Mark 4:16-17

(NIV)

“Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. 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.”

“at once receive it with joy”

Again, the HEARER of the word is the seed.

In 4:5, this is the seed that “sprang up quickly”.

For these people, the seed (word) is NOT snatched away before a response is even possible, like happened with the first seed. It just can't form roots.

“trouble or persecution”

By 4:6, this is the “sun” in the parable, and “fall away” is equated to the “withered plant”.

“fall away”

This is early language for apostasy – the abandonment of faith.

An initial response occurs, but trouble and persecution result in apostasy – a common scenario in early Christian days.

Mark 4:18-19

(NIV)

“Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word, 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.”

“among thorns”

Again, the person is the seed.

“worries of this life, deceitfulness of wealth, and desires”

Allegorically, these are the “thorns” themselves.

“choke the word”

Again, the WORD in the person is destroyed by this process, not the person.

Mark 4:20 (NIV)
“Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop – thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown.”

“produce a crop”

This is now the same language as in the parable itself, in 4:8.

The metaphor of producing a crop is apparently self-evident in meaning!

The people are like a SEED – when it matures, it creates fruit.

Note the transition in this parable:

Those who never receive the word (because Satan takes it)

Those who receive it but succumb to external pressures (like trouble and persecution)

Those who receive it but succumb to internal pressures (like worry and concern over wealth and other things)

Those who receive it and produce a crop

This is the full range of possible responses to the spread of the gospel!

The sower sows EVERYWHERE, not only where it will succeed.

Likewise, we cannot restrict our “sowing” – we trust that God will produce an abundant harvest – not by our own efforts!



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