

The Field We All Live In

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[0:00] Have a seat. And please do open up your Bible to Mark chapter 4. It's on page 839 of the Blue Bible, which should be in front of you.

Mark 4, we're beginning from verse 1 and reading to verse 34. Mark chapter 4, reading from verse 1.

Again, Jesus 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.

And he was teaching the many things in parables. And in his teaching he said to them, Listen!

Behold, a sower went out to sow.

And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. 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.

[1:14] And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no roots, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain.

And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.

And he said, He who has ears to hear, let him hear. And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables.

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, so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.

And he said to them, Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word.

[2:24] 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. And these are the ones sown on rocky ground.

The ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy, 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.

And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and desires for other things, enter in, and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.

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.

And he said to them, Is a lamp brought in to be put under a basket, or under a bed, and not on a stand? For nothing is hidden except to be made manifest, nor is anything secret except to come to light.

[3:36] If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear. And he said to them, Pay attention to what you hear. With the measure you use, it will be measured to you, and still more will be added to you.

But to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. 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. And he said, With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it?

It is like a grain of mustard seed, which when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth. Yet when it is sown, it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants, and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.

[4:47] With many such parables, he spoke the word to them as they were able to hear it. He did not speak to them without a parable, but privately, to his own disciples, he explained everything.

Amen. Amen. The words of the Lord Jesus, the words of the living God. Please keep them open, and let's pray for his help.

Father, we have just sung and acknowledged that you are your own interpreter, and we look to you, Lord, to interpret your word and your ways to us now.

Lord, keep us from imposing upon you what we would have you be, or do or say. Keep us from imposing upon your word what we would have it to mean.

But Lord, open our eyes, open our ears, soften our hearts, that we might truly receive the message of your word. And like the good soil, it might take deep root in us and grow and bear great fruit in us.

[5:53] This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. How many of us have been there? You've been praying for an opportunity to speak to somebody that you know about your faith.

Finally, they ask what you did over the weekend, and you tell them Jesus has entered the chat, only for them to totally ignore it and tell you about their weekend and never bring it up again.

You bump into somebody on the street who you used to teach in Sunday school as a child. Now they're all grown up. Why do they go to church these days?

Well, really nowhere, apart from maybe once or twice a year with mum and dad. They've outgrown what you taught them. There's always something more interesting to do. Life is just too busy without thinking about Jesus.

You sit in church for the hundredth time, the five hundredth time, the thousandth time, hear the Bible being read. At some point in the sermon, you realize, this isn't doing it for me in the way it once did.

[7:04] At first, it was so fresh, it was so exciting, and you, now I don't know how much further I want to take it. This isn't what I thought I signed up for. Where is God in those moments?

Where is Jesus' kingdom? Why, we think, isn't it working? Is it that we're saying it wrong? Is it we think that we're hearing it wrong?

We don't say it, but we can certainly feel it. Has God got it wrong? We're coming tonight to one of the relatively few blocks of teaching in Mark's gospel.

If you were here for our big Matthew series, you might remember Matthew has five huge blocks of Jesus' teaching. By contrast, sometimes people call Mark the picture book gospel.

He records for us less what Jesus taught and more what Jesus did, which should make us sit up and pay attention when Mark does give us a long bit of Jesus' teaching then.

[8:09] What does he need to tell us that he can't show us or tell us about what it is he's showing us? I think it's important that we're surprised when we come to chapter four to find this teaching because, you know, even if you've just been in church for a short time, it's possibly one of the most familiar bits of Jesus' teaching.

I counted, I think it's five or six times that this parable of the soils or the sower has been preached over the last five years. I think that's about right because Jesus is teaching something ever so important for us to hear, but it's ever so hard for us to grasp and to keep hold of it.

There are a couple of footholds, though, in the context to help get us into this. from last week's passage in chapter three. The first one is, Jesus, remember, he appointed 12 of his disciples to be sent out ones, apostles sent out to preach.

But, interesting, that's not actually going to happen until chapter six, where we read, he called the 12 and began to send them out two by two.

Then they went out and proclaimed that people should repent. So, as Jesus explains to them what this parable is about, they are hearing it as apprentice preachers or sowers in training.

[9:49] The sower, in Jesus' parable, verse 14, sows the word. What should they be expecting, then, as they prepare to take the gospel out and spread the word about Jesus?

What should we expect when we take out the gospel today? That's a question worth keeping in the back of your head as you listen tonight. If you're a note taker, maybe just scribble that question on the top of your sheet.

What should we expect when we take the gospel out today? In one sense, this is Jesus' very own evangelism training seminar, and there is no one really better to teach us, is there, than him. The other contextual foothold for us is what Jesus said about the religious scribes in 3, verse 29. To remind you, truly, he says, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man and whatever blasphemies they utter.

Forgiveness is here. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin, for they were saying, he has an unclean spirit.

[10:59] We're only in chapter 3, but incredibly, some people have already locked themselves out of God's kingdom because they have already made up their mind that Jesus is not good news.

The leaders of God's chosen people, Israel, have taken a hard pass on God's chosen king, Jesus. Knowing that will help us when we get to verse 12 of our passage to understand why it is that Jesus decides now to hide his message inside stories about farming and seeds and soil conditions, rather than speak plainly and simply about himself being the savior that they should have been waiting for. Friends, tonight, this is the field we all live in. It's the field we're sitting in tonight. It's the field in which Jesus' word is sown.

So as we come to it, let's listen up and hear him teach us what it is we need to know in order to grow and sow in this field. Firstly, our big, our big point, he wants us to be confident that his word never fails.

Earlier this year, I took Samuel and Caleb to the garden center and while we were there, they got to each pick a packet of seeds for us to plant in the garden. Samuel chose leeks, Caleb chose carrots.

[12:34] When it got warm enough, we sowed the seeds in the raised bed of our garden. Now, I used to grow some veggies at home growing up in London and one thing I could never get to work was carrots.

I'd dig the soil, heap loads of compost on it, make my nice kind of neat rows, pluck out the weeds, water it, nothing, nothing. However, when my four-year-old son got a handful of carrot seeds and put them in the soil like this and promptly forgot about them, what do you know?

Green shoots start to appear. I was so unprepared actually for them to work that we didn't really know what to do with them. Our neighbor over the back actually quite urgently ran around to our house with a massive net that he said we had to sort of wrap around them to stop carrot flies.

Apparently, that's a thing. Last week, after maybe six months, we pulled up the last of these carrots to stop them going bad. Overall, the results were pretty mixed.

Some of these carrots were too small to bother eating, cooking. Some of them had got chomped by slugs. Undoubtedly, some of the seeds had failed to grow at all, but some of them were actual proper carrots.

[13:54] We must have got maybe eight or nine meals out of these carrots. Why the variation? There are probably lots of reasons. One, though, that we can be sure of, that Caleb's carrots worked and mine didn't, or at least this is what I'm telling myself, is because of the soil.

Okay, since you asked. The Thames estuary has very heavy clay soil that doesn't drain very well. Carrots, like most root vegetables, prefer nice, light, sandy or chalky soil that drains nice and easily. They can put down their deep roots in the soil. The same is true in Jesus' field. The thing Jesus picks out as the variable in his field is not the quality of the seeds, not the technique of the sower, but the condition of the soil.

Notice, there are four different soils in the parable. Each one of them gets the same seed from the same sower in the same way, but each soil does something different with those same seeds.

The seeds that fall on the hard soil of the path, verse 4, sit there on the surface until the birds come and eat them up. Nothing grows. The seeds that fall on the rocky soil, verse 5, do grow, quickly sprout up.

[15:21] They look great at first, but they don't put down deep roots, so when the hot sun beats down on them, they just dry up and wither and die. The seeds in among the weeds, verse 7, they also grow, but their growth is stunted by weeds and thorns choking them and competing with them for water.

Seemingly, they don't die, but neither do they produce any grain either. Only the seeds that land in the good soil, verse 8, grow all the way up and do what the farmer is ultimately looking for them to do, produce a harvest, yielding 30, 60, 100 times what was sown.

He who has ears to hear, verse 9, let him hear. Now, what would you think if that's all you heard that day?

Just put your eyes on verse 10 for me. What verse 10 tells us is that from this point onwards, what Jesus says is only for those around him with the 12, meaning that all the crowd gets is verses 1 to 9, a story about a disappointing field with seeds in it and no explanation.

To an actual farmer, which many of them will have been, it must not have sounded very inspiring. You've just described Jesus a bad year on the farm. Why do people come and listen to this guy?

[16:52] He's so overrated. Indeed, even once we join the disciples and Jesus translates the parable into spiritual realities, it doesn't sound at first like very encouraging news.

A 25% success rate, it's not even worth getting out of bed for, is it? But what Jesus wants his disciples to grasp is that despite the seemingly disappointing outcome, in fact, his word has a 100% success rate.

When he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables, and he said to them, to you have been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.

What's Jesus saying? He's saying his parables are designed to both reveal and conceal. At one and the same time, the secret of the kingdom is being given to some and hidden from others.

Now, that's probably quite a shocking thing to hear if you've been taught before that Jesus told parables to make big truths about his kingdom easier for ordinary people to understand.

[18:28] If that is true, though, it's hard, isn't it, to count Jesus' own ministry a success. At the end of three years, when his work on earth was finished, those who had responded to Jesus' call numbered about 120 people.

It's probably less than is in this room tonight. Think about it. If you'd only heard the story, how would you even have known that it was about God's kingdom? A farmer sows seeds in a field, they land in different places, and different things happen to them.

So, what's happening to the crowd who heard the parable is what Jesus has said will happen in the parable. He actually says it's a parable about parables.

If you don't understand this parable, how are you going to understand any of the parables? He's put out the word like the sower, it's landed in different places like the seed, and it's divided the crowd like the soils.

And that is exactly what Jesus intended to happen. See, now there is a group with him, with the twelve, for whom Jesus' word has properly got under their skin.

[19:41] They need to know what it all means. They've come to ask him, Lord, explain it, they wanted more. But there are others who, on the outside, didn't bother to come and ask.

For them, they never get past a simple story about a farm, because whatever they make of Jesus, they're just not interested enough to listen any longer. They've heard all they want to hear.

So even the seed that doesn't grow hasn't failed, therefore, because it does what Jesus says his parables were designed to do, to separate out his hearers.

Everyone in the crowd heard the same thing, but to some it was given, and to others it was hidden. Some were drawn in, others walked away.

Lots of us will have played with magnets at some point in our childhood, whether the little Brillo toy train sets with their kind of magnetic couplings that you stick together, or a magnetic kind of building set, we've got some of those at home.

[20:55] You pretty quickly work out, don't you, the secret to magnets is that they both attract and repel. I remember a science lesson, in school where a teacher put a bar magnet down on the bench and poured iron filings on it.

As soon as these kind of iron filings hit the table, what did they do? They arranged themselves, as if by magic, into a shape, like a kind of figure of eight.

It's a different sort of field, a magnetic field, but like Jesus' word, it sifts and sorts, it pushes and pulls.

Let me say, that's still what Jesus' word does today. Every Sunday, every Bible study, every time you read your Bible at home or with a friend, Jesus' word is sifting us, sorting us.

What kind of hearer are we? how well are we listening? How much do we care what he's saying? If we're spiritually alert, we'll be asking ourselves every week, am I growing closer to Jesus through

his word, or am I drifting away?

[22 : 14] What have I done with what I heard last Sunday? Is this stuff just going over my head, or is it going into my heart and shaping my life? the fact that people respond differently to the gospel is no surprise to Jesus.

That's exactly what he says his gospel does. Because the seed in the story is the word, the gospel, verse 14. Jesus says this happens whenever it's heard.

The gospel lands on some people who are so hardened to it, verse 15, that it doesn't get under the surface of their heart, it falls on deaf ears. as we say, and the devil comes and hoovers up what was shared so that it can't get any further.

Now, does that remind you of anyone? It would have almost certainly reminded the twelve of the religious scribes and Pharisees that they had met in chapter three.

They've so hardened their hearts to Jesus that they would rather have Satan run wild in their territory than actually pay attention to what Jesus is saying.

[23 : 27] That quote in verse twelve, Jesus takes that from Isaiah six that we read earlier in our service, that's really telling. It comes from a point in Isaiah's ministry where Israel has thoroughly rejected God's word.

Isaiah tells us that the leaders then, like the leaders in Jesus' day, were calling evil good and good evil. And so the Lord says to Isaiah, from then on, his gospel preaching would no longer serve to soften them, but rather to harden them.

Make the heart of this people dull and their ears heavy and blind their eyes, lest they see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their hearts and turn and be healed.

In Isaiah's day, a tiny remnant, a handful, would see the light of the gospel and walk in it, but most would be blinded by that same gospel light and stumble away into darkness, not by accident, but by the Lord's design.

So with Jesus' teaching, he says his parables are a judgment on Israel because they had already called him the devil. The parables in one way serve then to hide the kingdom from those who have already vowed to destroy it.

[24 : 56] With others though, the gospel does get under the surface. It has an immediate bounce. They receive it with joy, verse 16. They love what they hear. It's fresh. It's life changing.

But when the cost goes up, when tribulation or persecution arise because of the word, it becomes clear that the gospel vibes are disguising the fact that the word isn't deeply rooted in their hearts, and just as quickly as they sprang up, immediately they fall away.

Again, have we met anyone like that? that? I could name a few over the years. Some who gave way under pressure from their families for their newfound joy in Christ.

Others who enjoyed the church community, maybe Christian values, but weren't prepared to endure the shame and embarrassment of actually following the Lord Jesus. We're certainly going to meet people like that in Mark's gospel if we haven't already.

some get further, still the gospel lands, it takes root and it grows, but verse 19, the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desire for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.

[26 : 23] Sadly, I reckon we could probably all name somebody like this, probably somebody who would say they were a Christian, perhaps somebody connected with a church, but the gospel is desperately suffocated in their life.

And not by things that we would normally say are damaging and our kind of top five worst sins, but everyday things that we all spend time thinking about.

The cost of living, drama at work, at uni, at school, getting the right grades, building up a side hustle, feeding five mouths at home, upgrading the car, getting on in my career, going on that holiday, all on and on and on it goes.

The list of potential cares and desires is endless. Riches, however you want to define that, continually elude us, however hard we work.

Making it, it's an ever-receding horizon. I'll have time to take Jesus seriously once, dot, dot, dot, and it never happens.

[27 : 28] happens. The word is choked by the weeds. I had a friend who used to say that there were times when he'd be reading the Bible and it felt like the Bible was reading him.

As he read the word, it acted like an x-ray on his heart and exposed what was inside of him. That friend has been on my mind a lot this week because since he last said that, the desire for other things has choked that word and he is no longer bearing fruit for the Lord.

Jesus' word searched, sifted. At the point that he closed his eyes to it, it blinded him to the goodness of the good news.

At the point that he said no, the word hardened his heart against it. Let me be clear, Jesus isn't talking about blinding and deafening and hardening people who would love to be a Christian, who genuinely seek him and are banging down the door of his kingdom to get in, who are asking, Lord, what do I have to do to be saved?

The gospel hardens those who have already hardened themselves. Whether that's as soon as they hear it, the path, or a little later when the cost goes up, the stones, or later still when other cares and desires have squeezed him out.

[29:05] But to those who seek him and are ready to bash down his door because they need to understand, he explained. He explained the secret of the kingdom.

He gave it to them freely, openly, because to them that secret had been given that he is the king of God's kingdom here to save.

Friends, know for certain that whatever his word does, it is always, always working. His word never, ever fails in the purpose for which he is sent it.

That's an awful lot to take in. So with the rest of our time, I just want to press that truth more deeply into two different areas. Basically, our speaking and our listening.

What do we do with Jesus' unfailing word of the gospel then? Well, secondly, keep speaking because his kingdom slowly but surely grows.

[30:12] Jesus says that there are some who the gospel lands on, who take it in, it puts down deep roots and grows and bears fruit. Despite only being one in four things the word does, it still brings in a huge return, 30, 60, 100 times what was sown.

We're going to see more what that fruit is in the weeks to come in Mark. Suffice it to say for now that this is the only right response to Jesus' message, to receive it lastingly and fruitfully.

Jesus doesn't want us to miss this. He goes on in verse 21 to tell four more parables, three of which are to do with the lasting gospel growth in the good soil. You don't put a lamp under a blanket, he says.

But up on a table where it can shine. 4, verse 22, nothing is hidden except to be made manifest, nor is anything secret, except to come to light.

Now what is secret in this chapter? Well, it's the secret of the kingdom of God, that the king has come and the kingdom is here. Like the light of a lamp, therefore, that wonderful truth is here to shine and be seen, says Jesus.

[31:32] The kingdom of God is also like a farmer who sows seed in a field and goes to bed. Verse 26. He gets up the next day and goes to bed a few more times, and there's green shoots.

Several months later, he gets up and harvests the finished crop. He didn't make it grow. He doesn't even know how it grew. It just grew. He just needed to plant the seeds and bring in the harvest.

Another farmer sows a mustard seed, verse 31, so small it's barely visible. A little while later, and it's the biggest tree in his garden, and birds are coming to nest in its branches.

Brothers and sisters, the kingdom of God grows. It grows. Yes, imperceptibly. Yes, slowly. In ways that we don't know and we can't control, but grow it does.

As surely as the kingdom is hidden to some, says Jesus, just as surely it will be given to others. That's why Jesus sent out the apostles to preach, to bring the light, to light what it was that was hidden, to reveal what was secret.

[32:51] The kingdom is near because the king is here. We only need to look around this room, don't we, to be encouraged as we see that light shining and that fruit growing in the lives of those who have believed that gospel.

It might seem desperately slow to us, but that's because we only see two points in the process. We share the message and then we look at people and wonder what's taking them so long.

But we wouldn't feel like that if we were responsible for the growing as well. We sow. God grows. We don't know how.

Just because we can't see it doesn't mean it isn't happening. In fact, we know that it is happening because in God's time and by God's grace, we have the privilege of bringing in a harvest of those in

whom the word has grown and borne fruit.

God's kingdom might look really small, pitiful, the smallest of all the kingdoms on earth. But it's been growing now for 2,000 plus years.

[34 : 07] Right now on earth, it is the biggest that it has ever been. And it will keep growing, says Jesus, until it is bigger than any other kingdom in the history of the world and overshadow every other rule and authority forever.

Brothers and sisters, how encouraging this is for us to keep sowing the word into people's lives. As if it wasn't enough to know that it never fails, Jesus promises that it also definitely does what we hope and pray that it will do.

It will land in some people's lives that we know in the church, in the world, in our work, in our school. And they will accept it and it will grow and bear fruit in them.

Keep speaking the gospel because in the Lord's hands and in his time slowly but surely and certainly it grows God's kingdom. And very finally, a lesson for our listening.

Very simply, listen up. The gospel gives life and light to those who hear it and take it into their heart. The gospel can also at a certain point harden those who hear it and ignore it.

[35 : 23] We must therefore listen up and give to Jesus our fullest undivided attention. I said that this was one of only few blocks of Jesus' teaching in Mark's gospel.

Just do me a favor. I know you're tired now, but flip back the page. What's the first word Jesus says in this teaching? Verse 3. Listen.

What does he want us to do? Verse 9. What does he want people to do with his parable? He who has ears to hear, what? Let him hear. And just in case we missed the memo, verse 24, he said to them, pay attention to what you hear.

With the measure you use, it will be measured to you and still more will be added to you. For to the one who has, more will be given and from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.

See, the surprising thing about everyone in Jesus' parable is that they all hear the word. None of them are the proverbial guy on the desert island who's never heard the gospel.

[36 : 33] They all hear it. What's the difference then between the hard soil and the good soil? Not whether we hear it, but whether we listen. Pay attention to what you hear, he says.

The measure thing is like measuring cups or measuring jugs that you might use in the kitchen for cooking or baking. Jesus is saying, bring an egg cup on a Sunday.

Okay, open your Bible with a thimble and you'll only ever get an egg cup and a thimble's worth of him. Bring a wheelbarrow and a transit van and a dump truck and you'll get a wheelbarrow and a transit van and a dump truck's worth of Jesus.

Friends, here's the question as we come into land. How much attention do you give to Jesus? How well do you listen? Do you care enough about what he says to ask questions, to read more, to listen?

Or if we're honest, are we okay not understanding? Or understanding and not responding? Or responding once upon a time, but not anymore, and not letting it be a lasting thing in our life?

[37 : 54] If that's you, listen up. Because Jesus says, whatever isn't bearing fruit in the end is lost to the one who has, more will be given from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.

You can understand as much of the gospel as you want. Have once prayed the sinner's prayer, have a church connection, call yourself a Christian. None of those things is worth anything in the end.

If the gospel isn't gripping your heart and changing your life. So friends, let me urge you and exhort you.

Don't stop short of that. Don't sell his gospel short. Don't settle for mere hearing or a flash-in-the-pan faith or the life that I've always dreamed of plus a bit of Jesus bolted on the side. None of that saves. Friends, tonight, even for the first time, hear the word and accept it like the good soil and let it show as you bear fruit for him this week, 30, 60, 100 times what you have received.

[39 : 14] Let's pray that that would be us. Let's pray for his grace. Let's pray for his grace.

Let's pray for his grace. Let's pray for his grace. Lord Jesus, have mercy on us, we pray. Lord, we know that we in ourselves do not have the strength and attention, the interest, the softness of heart

to be saved by your word.

Lord, by your Holy Spirit, have mercy upon us. Soften our heart, till the soil until it is good and deep.

Lord, we pray that you would grant to us a hunger and a thirst for your word.

Lord, if we are feeding on other things, we pray, Lord, that they would not satisfy us, that we would be driven back, Lord, to your gospel.

Father, we pray that you would help each of us. To you believe it. To you be those who sow that word into the lives of others. Father, we pray that not one of us would be lost.

[40 : 23] Help us all to grow up and bear fruit because of the gospel in Jesus. Grant us this, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.