

Why So Small?

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[0 : 00] There are some things in the world that if you didn't know they existed, it would really be too much to imagine.

Right? Tadpoles. Tadpoles. You couldn't make it up, could you? Loads of tiny little see-through jelly balls, each with an egg inside. The eggs hatch, the tadpoles come out, eat the jelly.

A few weeks later, you come back, and those tiny wriggling black things have grown 50 times the size. They're green, they've got legs, they eat slugs and say ribbit.

And if you didn't know that tadpoles became frogs, who in a million years would guess that that's what happened? Or a bunch of tiny eggs on the bottom of a leaf that hatch into very tiny, very hungry, caterpillars.

Again, you come back in a few weeks, and that caterpillar is in its own little house that it has woven for itself and emerges on beautiful colored wings.

[1 : 09] These are inconceivable, unimaginable miracles of growth and transformation, aren't they? And yet we hardly notice them.

But they are everywhere. Or who would have ever thought that the biggest animal ever to have lived on the face of planet Earth, the blue whale, would only eat one of the smallest animals on the face of the Earth, krill?

Or to think that every single one of us, every person in this room began life not at six, seven, eight pounds something, but as a single cell deep inside another person's body.

There are mysteries buried everywhere in the world, aren't they? Under the ocean, in the womb.

There are miracles of transformation that are hidden in plain sight, in puddles, under leaves.

And if you didn't know about them already, you would not believe me, would you? You wouldn't believe me. If someone from a parallel universe turned up tonight and said, tell me about how things work here, they would think that we were having them on, wouldn't they?

[2 : 26] That wriggly thing, that cannot become a beautiful butterfly. Or that thing about that whale, I'll never ever buy that until I see it. Things don't, they cannot work that way.

And we would all say, wouldn't we, but they do. Believe it or not, it really does work that way. There really are amazing mysteries woven so seamlessly into the fabric of our world, our universe, that we hardly notice them, but we cannot deny that they are there.

Things that start life so small, so unimpressive, really do turn into things that big. And that beautiful. And friends, tonight Jesus tells us that the kingdom of heaven coming into our world is one of those mysterious and miraculous things.

It started tiny and hidden, but it's growing. And one day it's going to fill the earth and give life and rest to everyone and everything that comes under its rule.

Now he's teaching us, isn't he, in parables, remember, stories, almost soundbites, that at one and the same time we've seen reveal and conceal what it is that he's saying.

[3 : 52] Right? Think about it. He could have just said to the crowd, couldn't he, God's kingdom came into the world tiny and hidden, but it's going to one day dominate and give life. He could have just said that.

Instead, he tells us two stories, one about a mustard seed and one about yeast. And in some ways the stories illustrate what he's saying, don't they? But in other ways they disguise what he's saying. And we've seen that the difference is whether his stories help you to understand or not, is ultimately whether you come to Jesus himself and ask him to give you the answer.

For those who come and ask him, well, he tells them what the stories mean. He reveals it to them. Those who don't come and ask, though, he says, will never find out.

And so if you like, the whole point of the parables, or the whole kind of thrust of chapter 13 is don't ask, don't get.

[4 : 51] Therefore, ask and get. Now someone smart and switched on is going to say, hang on, but these parables tonight don't have an explanation, right?

The parable of the sower and the parable of the weeds both get explained. These ones don't. So how do we know what they mean? Well, well spotted. I think, though, that we've had enough explanations so far to give us enough to go on, right?

It's not as if the disciples stopped coming humbly to Jesus at this point, is that they do that only in the next verse. Like verse 36, his disciples came to him saying, explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field.

So I take it that they're not busy trying to work out in their own heads these parables, as we're not. But they're beginning to hear his stories in the way that Jesus is teaching them to hear him.

And that is what we want together tonight, isn't it? To come to Jesus and hear these stories humbly, patiently, and depending above all on him for our understanding.

[6 : 04] Not proudly or arrogantly, presumptuously, thinking we know it all already before we've heard from him. So let's hear these parables then and take to heart their point, which I think is this, wait patiently for God's kingdom to fully come and don't lose heart, but trust Jesus.

Firstly then, and the much longer of our two points this evening, wait patiently. Listen again. He put another parable before them saying, 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.

We have a similar sort of proverb, don't we, about acorns. You look how a tiny acorn becomes a mighty oak. Remember this parable then as you're crunching through the acorns this year.

Jesus says, the kingdom of heaven is like an acorn on the ground, but to the power of infinity. An oak tree, I don't know, is what, a thousand, ten thousand times bigger than an acorn?

[7 : 26] Well, a mustard tree is at least a million, a billion maybe times bigger than its seed. A mustard seed is a tiny, tiny black speck.

If I had one on my finger, you wouldn't be able to see it. If you dropped it, it wouldn't only be sown. It wouldn't only be small in the ground.

It would be hidden. You could not find it if you tried. But when it's grown, I looked this up this week. A mustard tree can grow to 20 feet, some 30 feet.

And that, again, outwards. Its kind of circumference, its branches reach outwards. I think that's something like six or nine meters. If we had one here, there wouldn't be much room for the rest of us.

If you had one in your garden, there wouldn't be much room for many other trees or plants. So that all the birds would come to nest in its branches.

[8 : 24] Right now, it dominates the garden and gives life to the things that live there. But remember, says Jesus, it didn't start life that way.

And if you stood under your nine-meter mustard tree and had a little mustard seed on your finger, you'd barely believe that one of those came from one of these.

From the very, very smallest to the very, very biggest, at least as far as gardens go. Something tiny and hidden grows to dominate and give life.

And the kingdom of heaven is like that. As it comes into the world, says Jesus. Or listen again, verse 33.

He told them another parable. The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour till it was all leaven. Leaven is just yeast. I'm sure lots of us have had the joy, the anticipation of mixing flour and water and yeast and kneading it.

[9 : 32] And then you put it in a bowl and put a tea towel over it. And you go away and you come back. And that little lump of yeast in your bowl has expanded to fill the bowl. Maybe even crawl out of the bowl.

How has that happened? Well, that wee teaspoon or that wee pinch of yeast that you put into your kilo of flour has worked its way through. You can't see the yeast.

Right? It's hidden. You can't get it back out. But that little bit of hidden yeast is breathing inside the dough, making it grow, giving it a kind of life.

And I don't know what occasion the woman in Jesus' story is baking for, but I hope a good number of people come. Three measures is about nine gallons of flour. Sounds like quite a lot of bread. And especially when you think that the yeast is going to double that, isn't it? So 18 gallons, perhaps, 80 liters of bread dough.

[10:32] And again, pull the loaves and loaves and loaves and loaves out of the oven. Lay them out on the side and put your little bit of yeast next to them. And you'd hardly believe, would you, that all this bread came from that little bit of yeast hidden inside.

Again, something tiny and hidden has grown to fill and give life. And the kingdom of heaven is like that as it comes into the world, says Jesus.

Now, that is what Jesus tells the crowd. That's what he leaves them with. But what are we meant to get from these parables?

Right? Well, behind the scenes, as we know, Jesus has been unpacking his parables, hasn't he, to those who've come and asked him. And if you like, the big lesson so far up to this point is that God's kingdom is not coming in the way that we think it should.

Right? If we hear the kingdom of God is here, the kingdom of God, what we want is instant, total world domination, don't we? Right?

[11:47] Zero room for doubt, confusion, opposition. God is on the throne. Everything is right again. Isn't that what we long for? What we wish that the kingdom of God coming into the world meant now?

Right? That is certainly what the people of Jesus day thought kingdom coming meant. But that is not the world that they lived in or we live in, is it? Why is it so hard to be a Christian?

Why so much discouragement and disappointment and temptation and suffering if Jesus has brought the good and loving rule of God into the world?

Shouldn't it be easy to live for a king who's overcome the world? But Jesus has been correcting our vision, hasn't he?

By showing us the heavenly game plan, the big picture. The parable of the sower says there will be doubt, confusion, opposition, and eternal life.

[12:52] As the invitation into the kingdom spreads. So his kingdom comes slowly. And the parable of the wheat says things will still go wrong in the world for now.

The kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world exist side by side. Until, that is, he judges the world, gathers his people, punishes the wicked.

So his kingdom comes now with suffering. And both those things, as we've heard the last couple of weeks, are the deliberate plan of God for his kingdom coming.

Neither of those things are a sign of weakness or failure on God's part or his king's part or his kingdom's part. His kingdom comes slowly.

And his kingdom comes with suffering. So what's Jesus teaching us with these parables? Well, that his kingdom is growing from a small and hidden start.

[14:00] When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph before they came together, she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. Not a city, not a village, not even a home, not a family.

God's kingdom came into the world the size of a human embryo. And we started thinking about some things, didn't we, in the world that are hard to believe, that they grow in quite the way they do. Even when we know that they do, and it's true. Well, how about this? Can you believe it, says Jesus, that this, this is how God's kingdom began in the world? God, smaller than a mustard seed, better hidden than yeast.

The eternal son of God, the everlasting king from heaven, conceived in the womb of a poor and otherwise anonymous girl in the Middle East in the first century by the Holy Spirit.

But what did his small and hidden entrance into the world mean? For when she finds out, Mary herself tells us in song, he has shown strength with his arm.

[15:13] He's scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He's brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate. He has filled the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent away empty.

Maybe his conception, his small and hidden start, what does it mean? God's good and loving rule has arrived in the world.

Fast forward 33 years. Now, now surely we're talking about towns and cities, countries even, maybe, right? No, a bloody cross, an empty tomb, and 120 people locked in a room for fear of their

neighbors.

Another 33 years, while the Eastern Mediterranean has heard the news of King Jesus coming, a tiny, tiny persecuted minority has believed it.

We could carry on, couldn't we? 2,000 years later, right? Surely now, surely God's kingdom is fully grown, fully here.

[16:24] Well, two and a half billion people in almost every country on earth. It's hard to believe now, isn't it? It started so small. And yet, it's hard to believe too, isn't it, as we sit here tonight, that God's kingdom will one day fill the earth and give life and protection and rest to everything that comes under his rule.

Right? Isn't that hard for us here tonight? What, 180, maybe? 200 people. Isn't that hard for us to believe in a city of a quarter of a million?

Right? Walk out through those doors tonight and ask yourself, where is God's kingdom? Where is it? Friends, it is small and hidden in a handful of churches across our city, perhaps, what, a few thousand people in the third biggest city in Scotland.

Right? Easy, isn't it? Easy, easy for us to lose heart in the face of overwhelming, what, opposition, the overwhelming size of Aberdeen or Scotland or the world and the pitiful, the pitiful smallness and hiddenness of the church.

Right? They think today that Bible-believing Christians make up something like 2% of the population of Scotland. Brothers and sisters, we need to understand that most people don't even know that we're here.

[17:59] We are starting again, basically from the ground up, aren't we? And friends, if that thought makes your heart sink or you just don't even want to think about it, what it would take, well, hear tonight what Jesus is saying.

God's kingdom came into the world tiny and hidden like the smallest of seeds or a wee pinch of yeast, but it will grow to dominate and give life like the largest of trees in the garden or like more bread than you could possibly ever eat.

Right? But we ask, don't we, what do we need to do to make that growth happen? We, as we sit here tonight, what do we need to do for that vision to come true? Well, how many times a day does Jesus say in his story that the man had to go out and prune and water and fertilize his mustard plant?

Right? How much effort does he put in to make the smallest seed grow into the biggest tree? Or how many times does Jesus say in his story that the woman checks on her dough or worries about it or pokes it or turns the temperature up and down?

Right? No amount of work will make that seed to be bigger or smaller, will it? An acorn grows slowly but surely into an oak tree.

[19:24] so a mustard seed grows slowly but surely into the largest of garden plants, not because of the man's efforts, but because that's the kind of seed that it is.

And no amount of worrying will cause the dough to rise any quicker or bigger. No amount of checking or poking it will help. It will rise on its own, not because of the amount of effort that's been put into it, but because of the kind of yeast that is in it.

Friends, the minute that God planted a garden in Eden, it was destined to one day fill the earth because of the kind of garden that it was.

God's kingdom garden. And from the second that the Holy Spirit conceived a king in a virgin's womb, he was destined to rule the earth and give life to all who would find a home and find rest under the protection of his good and loving rule because of the kind of king that he is.

The one and only son of God, the true king from heaven, Jesus Christ. In the woods behind our house, there are always new saplings growing.

[20:46] And it amazes me really how they do that. Deer live in those woods, and yet they grow. No one goes out to check on them, water them. They're not protected. They're not pruned.

The seeds just drop on the ground, take root, and start growing. And left to themselves in 20 years, 30 years, there'll be great big trees. And who can take any credit for that?

Right? They will grow into big trees because that is the kind of tree that they are. Brothers and sisters, Jesus does not need us to make his kingdom grow.

He does not need our worry, input, work. It will grow because he is its king, and it is his kingdom. And he wants us to take to heart this truth that his kingdom is the kind of kingdom that starts

unimaginably small, but grows to be the biggest.

indeed, the only kingdom that there is. The one and only kingdom in which all life finds true life, where birds can nest, and where human beings can live life in all of its fullness.

[22 : 03] So then, what should we do? What should we do? Well, we should come into his kingdom while it's still growing, and wait patiently for it to reach its full growth.

Do you know, more people in the world became Christians in the 20th century than in any other century in the history of the world. The global church today would have been pretty unimaginable for the first disciples, wouldn't it?

And yet, even with the global church being the biggest that it has ever been, we still find a way to be glass half empty, don't we? Right?

Instead of taking to heart Jesus' teaching about how his kingdom grows from the smallest to the biggest, we become despondent and disheartened or half-hearted, and we let the resistance that there is and the opposition, the scale of the mission weigh on us, don't we?

There's so much left to do, and we're not up to it. Millions of people, we can't do it. Why bother? What's the point? Or we worry about it, don't we?

[23 : 14] The direction of our world or the way we think that the world is going when Jesus actually says his kingdom is on trajectory to fill the world and rule over it.

Or we wear ourselves out by trying to force it, trying to make growth happen under our own steam. When Jesus seems to be saying, doesn't he, that like a seed or like yeast, we can't speed it up or slow it down.

It just grows at its own pace, and it will be ready in its own time. Yes, slowly, but surely, surely.

And so, brothers and sisters, the lesson is this. Don't lose heart, don't worry, don't wear yourself out, but wait patiently for his kingdom to fully come.

And now, that doesn't mean wait passively, right? We just get on with our lives, put our heads down, and one day, Jesus will just come back and make it all better. No, it means that as we faithfully sow the seed of the gospel and pray and follow up and disciple people, as we do those things that we're called to do as his church, we wait patiently for his kingdom to come.

[24 : 39] Let me illustrate that for us. I did Christianity, explored one-to-one with a guy earlier in the year, and it was wonderful to just watch a personal understanding and relationship with Jesus take shape in this guy's heart.

I was actually watching before my eyes God's kingdom coming. And the best bit is that by the end of that, there was no sense at all that I could take any credit for the change in his life.

I had read the Bible with him, I'd faithfully followed up, we'd had conversations, but I can honestly say that it was effortless because all I was doing was what I had been called to do in that time for that person in that situation and just patiently wait for God to do the rest so that when God did give new life, it felt like having the best seat in the house for God's great performance response.

Not something I had directed, not something I'd taken part in or helped with. I was a spectator to what God was doing in a person's life, bringing life, giving his kingdom.

Brothers and sisters, waiting patiently doesn't mean doing nothing, it means faithfully carrying on, carrying out what God has given us to do while patiently looking to him for the growth that only he can give and that he promises will come.

[26 : 16] Many, many Christians have lived and died faithfully, working and waiting patiently, but haven't seen that growth in their lifetime. But do you know, later generations, more often than not, have looked back and seen the fruit of their tireless patience long after their time was finished and thanked God for those people's patient endurance in a day of small things.

We might not see the growth that we want to see now in the ways that we want to see it, but brothers and sisters, take heart, keep waiting patiently because it is never, ever wasted in the kingdom of God.

He will bring the fruit, he will give the growth in his time and in his way. Jesus is teaching us tonight not to grow weary, not to lose heart, not to worry, not to overwork, but to wait patiently for the promised growth and for the full coming of his kingdom when his loving rule and reign will fill the earth and give life to all that come under his protection.

And secondly, and more briefly, Matthew teaches us, therefore, to trust Jesus. Matthew leaves us with a thought in verses 34 and 35, all these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables.

Indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable. This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, I will open my mouth in parables. I will utter what's been hidden since the foundation of the world.

[27 : 58] Now, I think this is here to reinforce what Jesus has said before his word is testing hearts. At this point in his ministry, Jesus didn't give sermon on the mount, kind of sermons to the crowd.

He only spoke in parables. And Matthew says that was to fulfill what was said in Psalm 78, which we sang from earlier, about the revelation of eternal hidden truths.

And now, we couldn't sing the whole thing, but if you go back and read it later this week, the message of that psalm meshes just beautifully with what we're seeing in Matthew, which is that even though the Lord showed his goodness and grace and glory to his people, yet they turned their backs on him and rejected him, pushed him away, didn't trust in him.

So that by the end of the psalm, the Lord chooses a man after his own heart, King David, to rule over his people. And I think Matthew's saying Jesus is fulfilling the whole of Psalm 78.

He is the good and gracious and glorious one that his people have rejected. Yet he is also the son of David who God has chosen to be king over his people.

[29 : 11] And the last verse of that psalm that we sang, it says, with upright heart he shepherded them and guided them with his skillful hand. Back in chapter 9, remember this, Jesus looked on the crowds and what did he see?

Remember, a sheep without a shepherd. And how did he respond? Well, in his compassion, he became their shepherd. He began to teach them.

And so, as their good shepherd, what's he doing? He is graciously teaching them in parables and telling them deeply hidden truths that they could not work out for themselves.

And his purpose in doing that is to sort his sheep from the rest of the flock. His sheep know his voice and they follow him.

Those who are his will not only hear him but come to him, trust in him and walk with him. His sheep humbly turn and rely on him to understand his words and take them to heart.

[30 : 19] And so, friends, as we finish, one question. have you done that? Simply judging by how you've heard his words tonight, what kind of hearer are you of the Lord Jesus?

If you're not in his kingdom yet, there is just one lesson to trust King Jesus. If you haven't understood tonight, if you've felt a bit lost, if you haven't felt like you've known the ones who, the one who is speaking these words, well, let Jesus be your shepherd to guide you through his word. Trust him to give you that life and that rest that he promises that you'll find under his good and loving rule. He says the day will come when his kingdom will be the only kingdom, the only tree, the only bread, and friends, the only rest, only satisfaction, the only life to be found in that world will be in him.

This world gives some rest, some satisfaction, some life, but none of it lasts, and all of it leaves a bitter taste.

But Jesus' stories tonight invite each of us into his eternal kingdom to find life and rest in him that lasts forever, that will never perish, spoil, or fade.

[31 : 54] So would you come in tonight, come into his kingdom, turn humbly to him, rest your soul upon him, and wait patiently with his people for his kingdom to come and his will to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Let's pray for that together now, let's pray. Gracious Lord and shepherd of our souls, we thank you for these wonderful words.

Lord, we thank you that you have taught us in parables. We thank you that you've opened up to us deeply hidden truths. And Lord, we acknowledge that we need them to live in your world faithfully, to keep walking with you.

Lord, we acknowledge how often and how easy it is for us to become discouraged and disheartened, to be overwhelmed, Lord, by the odds, or to walk by sight rather than by faith in what you have said is true.

So forgive us, we pray, and correct our vision of this world. Help us, we ask tonight, to trust when you say that your kingdom will fully come, fill the earth, rule over it, and give life to all who have trusted in you.

[33 : 15] Lord, help us to look to that day with great hope and confidence and to live then, waiting patiently, working faithfully, as you call us to do. Welcome us in, we pray, Lord Jesus, for we ask in

your name.
Amen. Amen.