

Faith Parables

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1. What is “A Parable”?

A parable is **“an extended metaphor, or simile, frequently becoming a brief narrative, generally used ... for didactic purposes** ... which forcefully indicates a single idea ... Jesus in particular used the parable with skill and artistry”.¹ The purpose of a parable is to compare a concept or object that is well known or obvious with an unknown or new concept in order to provide insight into the nature of the new concept. A well-defined point of comparison is required. As used in the New Testament there are frequently two or more levels of understanding based on the comparison. A parable can be a fully developed story, a shorter comparison, or a simple saying with an implied comparison.

2. Jesus’ Use of Parables

There is a general misconception that Jesus used parables to make his teaching understandable to the common people. The majority of parables were in fact not presented to the common people, but to the disciples alone or to the political and religious leaders of the Jews (Pharisees and Sadducees). This is consistent with the plain statement of Jesus recorded in Mark 4 verses 9 through 13:

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.” (Isaiah 6:10)

¹ IDB3 page 649

And he said to them, “Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? (ESV)

The context is the **Parable of the Sower** which was presented publicly: “he began to teach beside the sea. And a very large crowd gathered about him” (Mark 4:1 ESV) Both Matthew (13:1-9) and Luke (8:4-8) also record the event – Matthew adds more detail and Luke is briefer. Jesus’ final words to the crowd were “**He who has ears to hear, let him hear.**” (Mark 4:9 ESV) In other words, Jesus assumed there were some in the crowd who would be called, and therefore could have some understanding, but most would not understand. Then following the above statement, Jesus explains the parable to the disciples (see Mark 4:10-20, Matthew 13:10-23, Luke 8:9-15).

3.The Parable of the Mustard Seed

Mark records this parable during the Great Galilean Ministry, so in the first half of Jesus’ public ministry.

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.” (Mark 4:30-32 ESV)

Matthew records the parable in the same situation as Mark.

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.” (Matthew 13:31-32 ESV)

Luke records the same parable during the Later Judean Ministry, so toward the end of Jesus’ public ministry.

He said therefore, “**What is the kingdom of God like?** And to what shall I compare it? **It is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his garden**, and **it grew and became a tree**, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.” (Luke 13:18-19)

The object of all three renditions is the Kingdom of God:

- With what can we compare the kingdom of God
- The kingdom of heaven is like
- What is the kingdom of God like

All three make the point that this is a “parable”:

- what parable shall we use for it
- He put another parable before them
- to what shall I compare it

All three instances identify **the grain of mustard**, sown, **as the know entity in the comparison**:

- It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground
- is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field
- It is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his garden

Mark and Matthew identify a mustard seed as very small:

- is the smallest of all the seeds on earth
- It is the smallest of all seeds

In all three **the object property of the mustard seed is that it grows**:

- yet when it is sown it grows up
- but when it has grown
- and it grew

All three identify **the end result as a large tree** under which birds can nest:

- 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
- 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
- became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches

Jesus' objective is to teach some aspect of the Kingdom of God. He assumes people are familiar with mustard seeds. **The crux of the parable is that once sown the mustard seed will grow.** This is the most obvious point of comparison with the Kingdom of God: the life and ministry of Jesus Christ were the beginning of the Kingdom on earth. In the beginning, the New Testament Church grew quickly, but it was always insignificant compared to the pagan Roman Empire. During the second century, the false church emerged. Through the actions of Constantine in the early fourth century, the false church effectively assumed the role of overseer of the now defunct Roman Empire. The false church and her daughters (Rv17:5) have become huge, but the True Church has remained small and obscure for the last 2000 years. **After the second advent, the True Church will fill the whole earth.**

The '**nesting of birds**' seems to be an allusion to Daniel the fourth chapter:

... behold, **a tree in the midst of the earth**, and its height was great. The tree grew and became strong, and its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth. Its leaves were beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in it was food for all. The beasts of the field found shade under it, and **the birds of the heavens lived in its branches**, and all flesh was fed from it. (Dn4:10b-12 ESV)

This is in contrast to the Kingdom of God:

... a stone was cut out by no human hand, and it struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold, all together were broken in pieces, and became like the chaff of the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away, so that not a trace of them could be found. But the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and **filled the whole earth**. (Dn2:34-35 ESV)

And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up **a kingdom that shall never be destroyed**, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever, just as you saw that a stone was cut from a mountain by no human hand, and that it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold. (Dn2:44-45a ESV)

As the mustard seed grew to be "larger than all the garden plants" so the Kingdom of God will be larger than all the kingdoms of this world. Once the mustard seed is sown, its growth is inevitable and inexorable. **This is the Plan of God: once sown, the growth and establishment of the Kingdom of God is inevitable and inexorable.**

4. The Parable of the Leaven

Mark does not have this parable. Matthew includes it immediately after the Parable of the Mustard Seed:

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 leavened." (Mt13:33 ESV)

Luke similarly includes it immediately after the Parable of the Mustard Seed:

And again he said, "To what shall I compare **the kingdom of God**? It **is like leaven** that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, until it was all leavened." (Lk13:20 ESV)

The object of both instances is the Kingdom of God:

- The kingdom of heaven is
- the kingdom of God? It is

Both make the point that this is a "parable":

- He told them another parable
- To what shall I compare

Both instances identify “**leaven** ... in three measures of flour”, as **the know entity** in the comparison:

- like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour
- like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour

In both instances **the object property of the “leaven” is that it will permeate all the flour**:

- till it was all leavened
- until it was all leavened

This parable has the same meaning as the Parable of the Mustard Seed but is simpler. Jesus assumes people are familiar with the permeating quality of leaven. The point of comparison is that **once the leaven is in the dough it inevitably and inexorably permeates. Once the Kingdom of God has been introduced to the earth it will inevitably and inexorably permeate the whole earth.**

5. The Parable of the Scattered Seed

Only Mark records this parable. He includes it in the same context as the Parable of the Mustard Seed:

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. (Mk4:26-29 ESV)

The object is the Kingdom of God:

- The kingdom of God

It is NOT explicitly identified as a “parable”, but it is implied:

- is as if

There are **two points of comparison**:

- 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 **object property of the growing seed** is that **it follows a specific sequence of growth stages**:

- The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear.

The relationship to the Kingdom of God is the “harvest”:

- when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come

This parable carries the same message as the Mustard Seed and the Leaven. In the points of comparison, Jesus assumes the listeners are familiar with growing seeds: they are planted and left to themselves for an appropriate period of time, and they grow. The process of growth is unknown and unimportant to the planter – it just happens. As it happens, the planter can observe the well-defined stages of growth culminating in ripe grain. At which point, the harvest occurs. **Once started the growth of the Kingdom of God is inevitable and inexorable.** The stages of the growth of the Kingdom are outlined in prophecy. The “harvest” is the first resurrection (see Revelation 14:14-16).

6. The Transfiguration

This event is reported by all three synoptists. It occurs during the Special Training of the Twelve Around Galilee – so around the middle of Jesus’ ministry. **The Transfiguration is an object lesson of faith:** Peter, James, and John are alone with Jesus on a mountain near Caesarea Philippi. The three see a vision of Jesus transformed and talking with Moses and Elijah. **A voice says “this is my son” – if the apostles had any doubts about the divinity of Jesus, this was designed to eradicate them.**

On coming down from the mountain, Jesus is accosted by a man who had requested some of the disciples to exorcise a demon from his son. They were unable. Jesus upbraids the listeners:

O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? (Mk9:19 ESV // Mt17:17, Lk9:41)

Jesus then heals the boy, and later the disciples inquire:

Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, “Why could we not cast it out? (Mt17:19 ESV)

Jesus replies:

Because of your little faith. (Mt17:20a ESV)

6.1 The Faith of a Grain of Mustard Seed

Jesus then presents this parable:

For truly, I say to you, **if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed**, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you. (Mt17:20b-21 ESV)

Later during the Later Perea Ministry, so approaching the end of Jesus’ public ministry, Luke records the following request from the apostles:

The apostles said to the Lord, **“Increase our faith!”** (Lk17:5 ESV)

Jesus then presents the following parable:

If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you. (Lk17:6 ESV)

These parables are very similar and make the same point. Matthew records a mountain; Luke, a Mulberry tree. Matthew records “move from here to there”, Luke, “be uprooted and planted in the sea”. **Both parables are explicitly given in the context of “faith”, so clearly “faith” is the object.**

Both parables allude to the Parable of the Mustard Seed:

- if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed
- If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed

The **point of comparison** in both parables is **moving an immovable object**:

- you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there’
- you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’

The **objective of both parables is that the immovable object is in fact moved**:

- and it will move
- and it would obey you

Matthew adds:

- and nothing will be impossible for you

6.2 Faith is a Gift of God

The unanswered question of these parables is:

What does it mean to “have faith like a grain of mustard seed”?

The surface meaning of the Parable of the Mustard Seed is the growth of the Kingdom of God. **In these Parables Jesus is pointing out that there is a deeper meaning to the Parable of the Mustard Seed.** The operative characteristic of the Mustard Seed is that it grows. That is an innate characteristic of the seed given to it by its Creator. **That is the point of comparison with “faith”. Faith is God’s gift.** The Christian life is about growing in faith. God provides faith without measure if it is used. The point of the “immovable object” is that **“nothing will be impossible”** against faith. **The immovable object is a metaphor for any challenge in Christian living or any challenge in doing the work of God.**

The parables of **the Leaven** and **the Scattered Seed** contain the same relationship to Faith. The Leaven has the innate property of growing to permeate a lump of dough. That property was put there by God. Faith works in the same way – as God gives faith and as it is used it grows until it fully permeates the heart and mind. Similarly, the scattered seed inherently follows the characteristics given it by the Creator. So, **a Christian who grows in the characteristics of faith as they are given by God, will grow to full maturity**, and be included by God in the harvest – the first resurrection.

7. The Withered Fig Tree

On Sabbath Nisan 10, four days before the crucifixion, on the way into Jerusalem, **Jesus curses a fig tree** (see Mark 11:12-14, Matthew 21:18-19). The next morning on the way into Jerusalem, Jesus and the apostles find **the fig tree to have withered up and died** (see Mark 11:20-21, Matthew 21:19-20). The apostles inquire about its withering and death, then Jesus replies with this parable:

Have faith in God. Truly, I say to you, **whoever says to this mountain**, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. (Mk11:23 ESV)

Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even **if you say to this mountain**, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' it will happen. (Mt21:21 ESV)

This parable is very similar to the parables in section **6.1 The Faith of a Grain of Mustard Seed**, and it has the same meaning. However, both Mark and Matthew here connect faith with prayer:

Therefore I tell you, **whatever you ask in prayer**, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. (Mk11:24 ESV)

And **whatever you ask in prayer**, you will receive, if you have faith. (Mt21:22 ESV)

This is the reciprocal nature of faith: a Christian must be in continual contact with God through prayer in order for God to be able to increase the Christian's faith (Lk17:5, 2Cr10:15).

Mark then adds another relationship:

And whenever you stand praying, **forgive, if you have anything against anyone**, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses." (Mk11:25 ESV)

We must forgive one another. An unforgiving heart stands in the way of prayer. Lack of effective prayer leads to stagnated faith.

8. The Parable of the Farmer

The Old Testament contains many parables. This parable from the Old Testament has much in common with the New Testament parables considered in this paper. The parable is in Isaiah 28 verses 23 to 29:

(23) Give ear, and hear my voice; give attention, and hear my speech.

(24) **Does he who plows for sowing plow continually?**

Does he continually open and harrow his ground?

(25) When he has leveled its surface, does he not scatter dill, sow cumin, and put in wheat in rows and barley in its proper place, and emmer as the border?

(26) **For he is rightly instructed; his God teaches him.**

(27) Dill is not threshed with a threshing sledge, nor is a cart wheel rolled over cumin, but dill is beaten out with a stick, and cumin with a rod.

(28) Grain is crushed for bread; he will surely thresh it, but not forever when he drives his cart wheel over it with his horses, he does not crush it.

(29) **This also comes from the LORD of hosts;**
he is wonderful in counsel and excellent in wisdom. (ESV)

Verse 23, calls attention to the speech identifying it as a "**wisdom saying**" or a "**parable**":

Give ear, give attention
hear my voice, hear my speech.

Verse 24 makes the point of the comparison:

Does he ... plow **continually**?
Does he **continually** ... harrow his ground?

Agricultural processes have a definite beginning and a definite objective or end point.

Verses 25 and 27 go into some detail of the agricultural process with which Isaiah's original audience would have been familiar. This is **the assumed point of contact with the known situation**:

When he has leveled its surface, does he not scatter ...
Dill is not threshed with a threshing sledge ...
Grain is crushed for bread ...

Verse 26 introduces **the object of the comparison**:

For he is rightly instructed; his God teaches him.

The farmer who follows the correct procedure is following the teaching from God. **The implication is the agricultural process will be successful, producing abundant harvest.**

8.1 The Context of the Parable

Verse 29 summarizes **the meaning of the parable**:

This also comes from the LORD of hosts;
he is wonderful in counsel and excellent in wisdom.

But, **it is ambiguous**. **What is it that “comes from the LORD”**? How is he **“wonderful in counsel”** and **“excellent in wisdom”**? To answer **we need to look at the context**. Isaiah 28 is part of the “Isaiah Apocalypse” (Isaiah chapters 24 through 29) – so **the whole setting is looking to the end-time**, to the Kingdom of God.

Verses 1 to 4 establish the date of the prophecy as before 721BC, since the first part of the prophecy is addressed to **“Ephraim”**, the Northern Kingdom. Verses 1 and 4 refer to the **“fading flower of its glorious beauty”** which suggests a date early the reign of Ahaz (**soon after 735BC**) as the wealth of the Jeroboam years was dissipating in the Northern Kingdom. The second part of the prophecy is addressed to the **“scoffers who rule this people in Jerusalem”**. Verse 15 mentions a **“covenant with death”** which is likely an allusion to the agreement Ahaz made with Tiglath-Pileser. **This suggests a date of around 734BC.**

Verses 1 through 4 look to the impending destruction of Northern Israel (a type of the Day of YHWH). Verses 5 and 6 then shift focus to the end-time when YHWH as the returning King of kings indeed becomes **“a crown of glory”** to the **“remnant of his people”**, and “justice” pervades the earth. Verses 7 and 8 return to the contemporary condition of Northern Israel where the leaders, **“priests”** and **“prophets”** are **“drunk”** – probably literally and very much figuratively (again a type of end-time conditions). These few verses demonstrate the phenomenon of **“temporal transparency”**, where the prophet sees events in a continuous manner with no indication of their temporal relationships.

Verses 9-10 and 12-13 are **atemporal** in that they apply to Isaiah’s contemporary situation, but they also apply to all situations where the people refuse to hear the word of God. Verse 11a is specific to the upcoming punishment of the Northern Kingdom by the Assyrians.

In verses 14 and 15, the prophecy is refocused to the Southern Kingdom. In verses 16 and 17a we have a Messianic prophecy. Isaiah 28:16 is clearly Messianic, and it is used several times in the New Testament (Rm9:33, 10:11, 1Cr1:23, 1Pt2:6). Verses 18 and 19 return to the contemporary situation in the Southern Kingdom. Verses 20 through 22 revert to the end-time – the Day of YHWH. Again, note the **temporal transparency** through verses 14 to 22.

8.2 The Plan of God

The prophecy contains several comparisons of the contemporary state of sin of Israel with the salvation implicit in the Plan of God:

- Verses 1 to 4 identify the sinful state of the Northern Kingdom; verses 5 and 6 then jump to the Kingdom of God
- Verses 7 and 8 condemn the “drunkenness” of the leaders; verses 9 and 10 indicate God’s intention to teach people the right way
- Verse 11 alludes to the impending punishment of Israel; verse 12 expresses God’s frustration that Israel refused to hear; verse 13 summarizes the condition of the people – they cannot understand God’s teaching
- Verses 14 and 15 now look to Ahaz’s political maneuvering in trusting in the Assyrians; verse 16 looks again to the Plan of God with the prophecy of the First Advent and verse 17a looks to the Kingdom of God

- Verses 17b through 19a deal with the punishment of Ahaz for his agreement with Tiglath-Pileser; verse 19b alludes back to verse 9, 10, and 12 and God's attempts to teach the people
- Verse 20 is a proverbial statement indicating that there is no escape from God's punishment; verse 21 alludes to the impending Day of YHWH by referring in contrast to two occurrences of the Old Day of YHWH when YHWH fought for Israel (see 2Samuel 5:17-21, Joshua 10:10-14) but now YHWH fights against Israel.
- Verse 22 sums it up: those who scoff will be caught up in the destruction.

The focus of the prophecy is the Plan of God. God has inexorably executed his plan in the past and will continue to do so in the future. The Plan of God is inviolable – it will succeed. **Verses 23 to 29 present the agricultural parable with the meaning that when God is ready, he will act, he will fulfill his promises.** Things will go according to his plan as surely as properly followed agricultural process will produce an abundant harvest. **This is the point of contact with faith and the other parables – the farmer has faith that his efforts will produce the harvest. Similarly, the parable enjoins faith in the Plan of God.**

9. Conclusion

Faith is the well-spring of Christian character. Faith is a gift from God – as long as it is growing in a Christian, it is inexorable. It will inevitably produce God's desired harvest – an individual to whom God is willing to extend the gift of eternal life at the first resurrection.

Faith overcomes all obstacles. Through faith a Christian can meet and overcome all challenges. Through faith Christians as a body will accomplish the Work of God. God's plan cannot be thwarted. In his grace and mercy, he has seen fit to work with fallible human beings giving us the opportunity through faith to attain to the stature of Christ (Eph4:13).

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www.esv.org

This excellent website provides full access to the ESV text, plus many useful tools to work with the text.

www.mikewhytebiblicalresearch.ca

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