Chapter 1

Endless Possibilities

The Parable of the Mustard Seed
{Mark 4:30-32}
Jeremy Barrier

One Main Thing

The possibilities are endless with God...

Introduction

What is it like?

Some things are simply too difficult to put in to words. I remember several years back, when my wife, Robin, and I were expecting our first child, and we were overflowing with anticipation and excitement about the prospects of parenthood. Amazingly enough, my brother, Joey, and his wife, Anna, shared the same due date with Robin for the anticipated birth of their daughter! I remember the day vividly, when Robin and I arrived at the hospital to visit Joey and Anna who "beat us to the punch" a few days before our son. I was anxious to know what I was about to experience, so I asked

my brother "So, Joey, what is it like? How does it feel?" He was speechless for a moment before finally lifting his lowered eyes to look at me face to face. He then said quietly with moistened eyes, "I just don't know how God could do it. I don't know how He could have sent His Son…" The feeling for the occasion was simply too great to even put into words. Not just the feeling of being a parent, but the discovery he was making in the love of God simultaneously. Wow!

I'm amazed when I pick up Mark's gospel and we find Jesus saying to his disciples, "To what shall we compare the Kingdom of God…To what shall I liken it?" Here we find Jesus, the messenger and Son of God, and He is struggling to put into words how He would describe the Kingdom of God. How does one speak of the heavens, the reign of God, or the sovereignty of a benevolent and loving father? How does one express the deep emotion of something so magnificent that words can't express it?

Setting

The Underdog

As you probably know by this point, the parables are those beautiful little stories where God does

attempt to communicate in words the feeling and ideas of God's reign, while also trying to situate us within it! How intimidating. In the case of Mark 4:30–32 (compare Matt 13:31; Luke 13:18–19), Jesus gives a universal illustration. Who doesn't know about seeds, dirt, trees, birds, and other small woodland creatures? This parable is a deceptively simple little story. In our Bibles today, the story itself lasts only three verses, but the punch, when adequately appreciated, has outlasted two millennia of interpretation by the "faithful." In this case, the simplicity of the story is apparent. In the language of hyperbole, Jesus gives a story about the underdog who overcomes. It is a message about how the "smallest" becomes the "greatest." This is an encouraging story for the ages. We all deeply love rooting for underdogs and seeing them conquer in the end. It is the football team greatly outmatched by their opponent, but somehow in the last moments of the game they pull off the 'hail mary' and win! We, as readers, are immediately able to discern this parable and we love it.

Interpretation

The Mustard Bush

However, at this stage, the echoing words of

Jesus grab my attention as He so often said, almost scornfully, addressing His many multitudes of male and female followers, always addressing them in the more formal and socially appropriate masculine voice: "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." "Hear what?", you might ask. Indeed, the parable does have deeper dimensions to it. I have personally asked thousands of Christians on four different continents what they know about horticulture or plant husbandry, especially in regard to the planting and growing of mustard seeds. Only in Vietnam have I crossed paths with readers who actually grow mustard and were aware that mustard seeds grow into bushes and not trees! That's right, one might think Jesus has misled us on two counts in this story. First, the mustard seed is not the smallest of all of the seeds and secondly it does not grow into a tree! True, Mark mentions shrubs (not literally trees), but the story is elaborated further in Matthew and Luke giving us "trees" with great branches. It especially does not put forth branches for the birds! Now we are getting somewhere with Jesus' perplexing story.

Our own unfamiliarity with the flora of Palestine has caused us to miss an important detail. Jesus' hearers did know about mustard seeds and mustard bushes; thus, the parable would have taken on

greater (shall we say even apocalyptic) proportions. What I am hinting at are the references to Scripture that Jesus embeds in His story. He quickly cites the examples of the great, old growth, trees of Scripture. The massive trees of the ancient near east, possibly even like those of the great "Cedars of Lebanon," that become home to the birds and shade to the weary traveler. These trees played a prominent role in an arid world that did not often see such visual demonstrations of strength, power, security, and dependability. In fact, we see the trees in Genesis 1-3 and realize that they bring even life and knowledge. Then we find the prophets of God recall them, comparing both kings and Israel alike to them (Ezek 17:23; 31:6; Ps 103:12 [LXX]; Dan 4:9, 18). These trees are not ordinary trees, but they represent the might and supremacy of God. A supremacy, that by the time of the persecutions of the first disciples of Jesus had become symbols of God's heavenly home, the New Jerusalem, as recalled in Rev 21–22. Jesus was challenging His hearers to imagine the impossible. Tiny mustard seeds growing, not into just bushes, but the old growth trees of Eden that provide shade for the birds and symbolize the might of kings!

Application

Trust Me, I Know What I Am Doing!

Here comes the "double take." The story is not merely a good story about the underdog. It is about people accomplishing the impossible. In Scripture, through faith, we overcome odds that cannot, should not, and never will be overcome… except…yes, that it is the amazing, punctiliar, impossible-made-possible God of Scripture! When God reigns in my life, God makes things happen that cannot happen otherwise. It doesn't mean that we can subvert God's will to ours, but He subverts our will to His! There have been so many marriages that would "never make it", but then the spouses submit to God and they "miraculously" make it! I am talking about all of the thousands of problems we face in life and there is simply no clear solution for them. We are trapped. We are fenced in. We are going to lose. Then enters the reign of God in our lives and the possibilities for deliverance change dramatically. Jesus is challenging us to trust Him! He is looking at us with deeply loving eyes and saying, "Please, trust me, I know what I'm doing!"

Conclusion

Recently, I had the chance to sit down with a few—only a few—of the Christians who live in Hanoi, Vietnam. The church in Vietnam was battered and almost crushed in 1975, following the Fall of Saigon on that sad day in April. "Crushed, but not destroyed…", if I may borrow Paul's memorable words (2 Cor 4:9). One of the Vietnamese Christians had brought her cousin with her who had never been able to sit and speak with those who believed in any god, let alone with Christians. As we sat for the next three hours discussing and explaining the God of the creation, I was amazed by the entire exchange. She was very anxious to learn about God! The young lady was aware and could see the 'signature' left on His handiwork that we call the Earth and could be seen all throughout the cosmos, made by a sovereign God. Indeed the ink was still not even dry from His signing! At the end of the day, we, even like the many of Hanoi, are aware that we are living in God's dominion. Sometimes the pains, the struggles, the realities of life weigh us down, and we forget that the one who set it all in motion is also seeking to weave our life into the grand drama called life. The challenge is for us. Will we trust Him? Will we be a part of God's reign? Will we allow God to do the impossible in our lives? Will we allow God to

make us grow beyond our wildest expectations? The choice is ours.

Discussion

1. If you were asked to describe what it feels like to love to someone who says he or she has never loved, how would you describe it? Is it difficult to fully explain love to others in words? Do you think it would have been difficult for Jesus to explain His kingdom to those around Him who had never seen it?

2. Have you ever grown any plants all the way up from seeds? What does it feel like? Is it difficult? Have you ever had any unexpected outcomes from your planting seeds?

3. If you were King for a day, what would you do? Would you feed everyone, give them good housing, or heal their illnesses? What do you think life would be like if God were "King for a day"?