

# Mark 4

by John Nelson Darby

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*The parable of the sower teaches us about the different responses to the gospel and the importance of being faithful in communicating the truth.*

**Scripture:** Mark 4:1

**Topics:** "Faith in Trials", "The Parable of the Sower"

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## Description

John Nelson Darby expounds on Mark 4, focusing on the parable of the sower and the various responses to God's word. He emphasizes that true fruitfulness comes from a heart genuinely receptive to God's grace, contrasting it with those who superficially receive the word but fail to endure trials. The sermon illustrates how the kingdom of God grows mysteriously and powerfully, even when it seems hidden, and reassures believers that they are secure with Christ amidst life's storms. Darby highlights the importance of self-judgment and the necessity of allowing God's light to shine through us to bless others.

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## Transcript

Seated in a boat at the lakeside, the Lord presents the parable of the sower, who went forth to sow that which, if received in the heart, should bring forth by grace the fruit desired of God. The fruit was not to be found in the vineyard where man was to be tried just as he was in the flesh, under the old covenant, the law being written upon tables of stone. It is on this account that the Lord cursed the fig-tree which did not bring forth fruit, but leaves only; He had digged about it and dunged it, but in vain; therefore it was to be cut down. Solemn truth! Grace raises us above sin, but man in himself is lost as regards his responsibility. The Lord begins to teach the crowd in parables: saying "a sower went forth to sow." As we have said, He no longer seeks for fruit from man upon the earth, nor in His people, but sows that which ought to bring forth fruit.

250 As the sower sows, some falls by the way-side, some on stony ground, some in the midst of thorns, and some on good ground. It is no question here of doctrine, but the facts which follow the sowing of the word of the kingdom present themselves; it is a question of outward facts. Three parts bear no fruit. When the word is sown in the heart, in the first instance, it rests on the surface of the ground, it does not penetrate the heart; the devil takes away the word, and no fruit is left. In the second instance the word is received with joy; the hearers are glad to listen to the sound of grace, of pardon, of the kingdom; but when this brings with it affliction or persecution, they leave it. The hearer had received it with joy; he leaves it when affliction comes: the conscience is not brought into God's presence; the need of a troubled

conscience is not felt. It is in the conscience that the word of God fixes its roots; because the presence of God is revealed and awakens the conscience. God Himself is revealed to the heart, and one finds oneself in His presence with the consciousness of being there. Self-judgment follows, the darkness passes away, and the light of God shines in the heart. When the conscience has already been exercised, then the gospel brings joy at once, and God's answer to the soul's need. Whatever the grace and the love of God may be, when they are first revealed, they do not produce joy, because the conscience is reached; the light penetrates, because God is light. Love (for God is love) inspires confidence, the heart is attracted and trusts, like the sinful woman who washed the Lord's feet with her tears; but the conscience, not being yet purged, has no joy. If the announcement of pardon gives joy, there is reason to fear that the conscience is not awakened. The understanding (perhaps also the natural affections) has understood the beautiful story of love and pardon told in the gospel, but the work is only surface-deep and disappears.

Another part of the seed fell amongst thorns, and the thorns, growing up, choked it, and it did not bear any fruit. Last of all, that which fell on good ground brought forth fruit in different proportions. The object of this discourse is not to shew how this takes place; it speaks only of the effect manifested. Doubtless it is grace, but the fact alone is told. We see the activity of grace in the heart in this last case, because it grows and bears fruit, and keeps on growing. He who has truly received the word in the heart is fitted to communicate it to others. He may not have the gift of preaching, but he loves the truth, he loves souls, and the glory of the Saviour; and the light which has been lit in his heart is to light all around him. He too sows according to his strength, and is responsible to do so. All will be manifested, faithfulness and unfaithfulness, with regard to this, as in everything else. God sends light into the heart in order to give it to others, and not to hide it. We shall receive more, if we are faithful in communicating what we possess; and, if there is love in us, this cannot fail. Truth and love both came in Christ, and unless the heart be full of Christ, the truth will not be manifested: if the heart be full of other things, or of itself, Christ cannot be manifested. If Christ - truth and love - be in the heart, the truth will shine out for the blessing of others, and we ourselves shall be blessed, and more will be given to us; and there will be liberty and joy in the soul. That which he already possesses will be taken away from the man who does not let others profit by the light he has.

251 We see here again that the Lord's ministry amongst the Jews was ended. "To you it is given," He says to the disciples, "to know the mysteries of the kingdom, but to those that are without all these things are spoken in parables, in order that seeing they may not perceive, and that hearing they may not understand, lest they be converted, and their sins be forgiven them." They are under the judgment of God. The Lord does not mean to say here that a soul might not believe in Jesus individually, and thus be forgiven; but that the nation, having rejected the testimony of Jesus, was now deserted of God, left outside, and exposed to His judgment. He reproveth the disciples because they too could not understand the parable, nevertheless He explains it to them in His grace.

After this explanation and the respective warnings of which we have spoken, the Lord gives another parable which presents His ways very clearly. The kingdom is like unto a man that casts seed into the ground, who, rising and sleeping day and night, allows it to increase without taking any notice of it. The earth produces thus fruit of itself, first the blade, then the ear, and then the full grain in the ear. Now when the fruit is ripe, the sickle is put in at once, because the harvest is come. Thus the Lord worked personally, sowing the word of God upon earth; and at the end, He will return, and work again in person, when the time for the judgment of this world shall have come; but now in the meantime, He remains seated at the right hand of God, as though He did not occupy Himself with His field, although in secret He does work by His grace, and produces everything. But it is not manifest. Without being seen, He works to make the seed

grow in a divine way by His grace, whilst apparently He allows the gospel to grow without having anything to do with it until the harvest. Then He will appear and will Himself work openly.

252 He teaches the people again with another parable. We do not find here the whole story of the kingdom as in the thirteenth chapter of Matthew, but only its great principles, and the Lord's work in contrast with His manifestation and the establishment of the kingdom by His own presence. It grows during His absence, no one knows how, at least as regards human knowledge. The kingdom, then, is like a grain of mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds; but as soon as it is sown it grows, and becomes a large plant, even a tree large enough for the birds of the air to rest upon its branches. Thus Christianity, a little seed, that of a man despised by the world, has become a great power upon the earth, and extends its branches everywhere. Here the Evangelist repeats that the Lord spoke to the crowds in parables, and that He did not address them without parables; then He explained the whole to His disciples, when they were alone with Him.

In that which follows, we have, I think, a picture of the departure of Jesus, and of His power; the security of His own even when He seemed to be indifferent to their difficulties; then the relationship in which He stood towards the Jews. Jesus, having sent away the multitude, gets into a boat and goes to sleep whilst a tempest arises upon the lake, so that the waves fill the boat. The disciples, full of fear, come to Jesus to awaken Him; Jesus arises, rebukes the wind, and says to the sea, "Peace, be still," and all is quiet. But then He reproves the unbelieving fear of the disciples; and indeed, reader, do you think that the power of the Son of God, God's counsels, could have failed because of an unexpected storm on the lake of Gennesaret? Impossible! the disciples were in the same boat with Jesus. Here is a lesson for us: in all the difficulties and dangers of the christian life, during the whole journey upon the waves, often agitated by the tempestuous sea of life and of christian service, we are always in the same boat with Jesus, if we are doing His will. It may seem to us that He is sleeping; nevertheless, if He allows the tempest to rise in order to prove our faith, we shall not perish since we are with Him in the storm; evidently neither He nor we can perish. He may seem sometimes to be indifferent to our fate; but I repeat we are with Him; His security is our own.

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Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-nelson-darby/mark-4/>

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