

# Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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## The Expansive Nature of the Kingdom

by Dan Trygg

“And He said, ‘How shall we picture the kingdom of God, or by what parable shall we present it?’ <sup>31</sup> It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the soil, though it is smaller than all the seeds that are upon the soil, <sup>32</sup> yet when it is sown, it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and forms large branches; so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches.”

Mark 4:30-32

“He spoke another parable to them, ‘The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of flour until it was all leavened.’ <sup>34</sup> All these things Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables, and He did not speak to them without a parable.”

Matthew 13:33-34

“You continued looking until a stone was cut out without hands, and it struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and crushed them. <sup>35</sup> Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were crushed all at the same time and became like chaff from the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away so that not a trace of them was found. But the stone that struck the statue became a great mountain and filled the whole earth. ... the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed, and that kingdom will not be left for another people; it will crush and put an end to all these kingdoms, but it will itself endure forever.”

Daniel 2:34-35,44

All three of these word pictures describe the expansiveness of the kingdom of God. They all communicate a small beginning and great growth. **Taken together, they speak of a kingdom which God will initiate, and which will grow incredibly large and expansive. It will destroy and displace all other kingdoms, and will endure forever.**

**The kingdom of God is like a grain of mustard.** Jesus introduces this parable by saying, “How shall we picture the kingdom of God, or by what parable shall we present it?” **The growth of the mustard seed is a “picture” of the growth of the kingdom of God.** It is a word picture that is descriptive of how the kingdom is to grow.

**What is peculiar about the mustard seed, ...literally, “a grain of mustard”?** There are several different Greek words for “seed”. This word, *kokkos*, occurs only seven times in the NT, and five of these are about the grain of mustard (Matt. 13:31; 17:20; Mk. 4:31; Lk. 13:19; 17:6). **The emphasis of the word is on the speck, the kernel, the tiny grain.** The other two references to this word also emphasize the tiny size of the grain (Jn. 12:24; 1 Cor. 15:37).

**The mustard plant Jesus was describing undoubtedly refers to the black mustard. Its seeds were proverbially small,** ...the smallest of the seeds that people commonly planted. **Yet the black mustard grows up to a bush that could reach nine feet in height,** certainly larger than common garden plants. It did develop large branches which the birds could settle in.

However, **this last part of verse 32 has a well-established precedent in the OT. It was a word picture of the expanse, extent and prosperity of a great kingdom.** It is a clear reference to the Babylonian kingdom of King Nebuchadnezzar, recorded in Daniel 4. He shared what he dreamed in verses 10-12, “Now these were the visions in my mind as I lay on my bed: I was looking, and behold, there was a tree in the midst of the earth, and its height was great. <sup>11</sup> The tree grew large and became strong, and its height reached to the sky, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth. <sup>12</sup> Its foliage was 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 sky dwelt in its branches, and all living creatures fed themselves from it.” Daniel interprets the picture: “The tree that you saw, which became large and grew strong, whose height reached to the sky and was visible to all the earth, <sup>21</sup> and whose foliage was beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in which was food for all, under which the beasts of the field dwelt and in whose branches the birds of the sky lodged -- that tree is you, O king. For you have become great and strong: your greatness has grown and even reaches the sky, and your dominion extends to the ends of the earth” (Dan. 4:20-22). **The same word picture is used of the greatness of Assyria in Ezekiel 31:3-6,** “Behold, Assyria was a cedar in Lebanon, with beautiful branches and forest shade, and very high. Its top was among the clouds. <sup>4</sup> The waters made it grow, the deep made it high. With its rivers it continually extended all around its planting place, and it sent out its channels to all the trees of the field. <sup>5</sup> Therefore its height was loftier than all the trees of the field, and its boughs became many and its branches long because of many waters as it spread them out. <sup>6</sup> All the birds of the heavens nested in its boughs, and under its branches all the beasts of the field gave birth, and all great nations lived under its shade.” **This image is even used of a restored Israel in Ezekiel 17:23-24,** “On the high mountain of Israel I shall plant it, that it may bring forth boughs and bear fruit, and become a stately cedar. And birds of every kind will nest under it; they will nest in the shade of its branches. <sup>24</sup> And all the trees of the field will know that I am Yahweh; I bring down the high tree, exalt the low tree, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish. I am Yahweh; I have spoken, and I will perform it.” **So, when Jesus used this word picture, it was a clear**

reference to a great and expansive kingdom, a kingdom of abundance, safety and refuge. ***It also tapped into the prophetic expectation of the people who were listening to Him.*** They were looking for such a kingdom *to be established by God.* He can take even the dry tree, and restore it to greatness.

**The point of the parable of the grain of mustard is that from very small, insignificant beginnings, a great, expansive awesome thing can develop.** From a tiny beginning of apparently powerless, unimportant people, a kingdom could amazingly grow and stretch out in all directions to provide health, safety and abundance to many.

**The kingdom of God is like leaven.** It is like when a woman puts some fermented dough into a much larger batch of dough. ***The comparison is, once again, how from a very small, insignificant, virtually invisible beginning, the influence of the kingdom of God can spread inevitably throughout the world.***

In the word picture, the woman puts the bit of fermented dough into “three measures of flour”, or roughly 36 quarts of flour. **As the leaven did its work, the amount of dough would double or triple in volume.** That would make enough bread for as many as 160 people! Incidentally, this was the same amount that Abraham instructed Sarah to make for God and the two angels that visited him in Genesis 18:6. Obviously, this was intended to be more than a private meal, ...it was meant to be a communal meal for his entire household, ...enough to feed a village! This is supported by his instruction to kill the fatted calf, also enough for a feast feeding many people.

**Jesus’ word picture is not just about the spread of leaven in everyday use. It shows the incredible, unstoppable, pervading power of yeast to spread and permeate through an amazingly large amount of dough.** The kingdom of God is like *this!* **It is quiet, silent, virtually undetectable, but nevertheless inevitable, unstoppable, spreading throughout.** The tiniest amount has the ability to spread throughout the whole. ***It also has the ability to expand resources and supply the needs of many more people.***

Jews were taught to cleanse out the leaven from their houses and dwellings every year at Passover (Ex. 12:15-19), and they knew it was to be excluded from most sacrifices (Lev. 2:11; cf. 23:17). For them yeast was seen as nearly unclean. **For Jesus to say that the kingdom of God was like leaven would have been shocking! It would have gone against their natural way of looking at things.** The kingdom of God is like that, too: Though it starts from questionable, “unclean” beginnings (sinners), it transforms and produces something positive, valuable and desirable.

**Also, in Jesus’ parable, it is a peasant woman who is the main character of the word picture.** She is the one who introduces the yeast into the lifeless dough, and begins the process of growth and expansion. This, too, would have worked against peoples’ sensibilities. ***She is in the place you would have expected God to be represented.*** **The kingdom of God does NOT work as you might expect.** He works in ways, and with people, who were not expected or esteemed. **Gender or class does not preclude someone from introducing the “leaven of the kingdom” into their network of relationships (cf. Gal. 3:26-28).**

**The kingdom of God is like a stone that will grow and fill the earth.** This third word picture of the kingdom of God is from the OT (Dan. 2). It preceded Jesus’ teaching by over 600 years. **It was a word picture given to a pagan king, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, in a dream.** Our study of the kingdom of God has brought us back here several times, because Yahweh laid down some important information about the coming kingdom way back there. In this dream, which was *initially given* to Nebuchadnezzar and then *supernaturally revealed* to Daniel in answer to prayer, Nebuchadnezzar had seen a great statue. It was made out of different materials, a golden head, its breast and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, its lower legs of iron, and its feet and toes a mixture of iron and clay. **As the king watched, a stone was cut out without hands (supernaturally), and it struck the statue on its feet and crushed them.** Then the entire statue was crushed, pulverized to dust, and blown away by the wind. **The stone that had struck the feet, however, became a great mountain, and filled the entire earth.** As Daniel gave the interpretation, he said that each succeeding metal portion of the statue represented successive kingdoms. In the days of the fourth kingdom (the Romans), **“the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed, and that kingdom will not be left for another people; it will crush and put an end to all these kingdoms, but it will itself endure forever”** (Dan. 2:44). According to the dream, however, this kingdom will start out small, and will destroy and displace all these other kingdoms and will fill the entire earth. **This is another word picture of a growing, expansive kingdom. A kingdom that will start small, but will inevitably, unstoppably grow to “become a great mountain” that will fill then entire earth (2:35).**

Like these word pictures, the kingdom of God will start out from small, unexpected, almost imperceptible beginnings. It will expand and grow incredibly, and will fill the entire world. Its growth will be both almost invisible (like yeast), yet become a visible place of refuge (Acts 2:47), providing help and provision to many (Acts 4:33-35; 6:1-7). It will challenge, displace and destroy oppressive worldly power structures and continuously introduce positive, righteous changes that bring benefit to people, and glory to God (Matt. 5:14-16; Phil. 1:27-2:16; Gal. 3:28; Matt. 16:15-19).