

# Matthew 13:31-32

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/matt/matt-13/matthew-1331-32/>

*Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a mustard seed that grows from a small seed into a large life-giving tree.*

The parallel Gospel accounts of this parable are Mark 4:30-32 and Luke 13:18-19.

Matthew shares a third *parable* of Jesus concerning *the kingdom of heaven*. The *them* who Jesus *presented* this *parable* to is the crowds (Matthew 13:34). This short *parable* is known as “the *parable* of the *mustard seed*.” It is also recorded in Mark 4:30-32 and Luke 13:18-19. As may be the case with all of these parables in Matthew 13, it is possible, if not likely, that Jesus *presented* this *parable* more than once, perhaps many times, and to different groups of people. These parables are examples of some of the parables that Jesus taught during this season of His earthly ministry. We know that Jesus taught other parables that Matthew did not record such as “the *parable* of the good Samaritan” (Luke 10:25-37) and the *parable* of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). There very well may be other parables that *He* taught that scripture does not record. The parables Matthew selects for this portion of his gospel narrative all share a common theme. They all have to do with *the kingdom of heaven*.

Jesus said *the kingdom of heaven* is comparable to a *mustard seed*. This is an odd comparison. Because *the kingdom of heaven* is supposedly a great and mighty domain. One would think that it was so vast that its borders could hardly be measured if at all. And with God as its protector and His Messiah as its king, it would be invincible. And here is Jesus comparing this infinite, invincible *kingdom* to a tiny *seed* that is *smaller than all other seeds*.

But there is more to this littlest of *seeds* than meets the eye. It has tremendous potential to transform into something much *larger* and very different than what it currently is now.

*He* says *the kingdom of heaven* is like a tiny *mustard seed* which a man took and planted in his *field* that one day becomes a *full grown tree* that is *larger than all the other garden plants*. The little, round *mustard seed* transforms into an astonishing *tree* with roots, a trunk, limbs, and *branches*. It is a natural marvel that something so small and unremarkable could become so entirely different. *The kingdom of heaven* is like that too.

Small, unremarkable acts done in the name of Jesus which attract little to no attention among the busy affairs of human kingdoms are really *mustard seeds* that become *larger*, and have a greater eternal impact, than all the mighty deeds of renown performed in the name of earthly kings.

Of the *tree* the *mustard seed* becomes, Jesus adds, *so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches*.

Jesus often mentions *birds* in his teachings. In the Sermon on the Mount, when *He* tells His disciples not to worry, *He* invites them to consider *the birds* which do not sow nor reap but are

provided for by your Heavenly Father (Matthew 6:25-26). And when Jesus sent out His disciples to spread the gospel of the kingdom among the tribes of Israel and would face persecution, that your Father in *heaven* sees even when sparrows fall to the ground, and Jesus assured His followers that they “are more valuable than a great number of sparrows” (Matthew 10:31).

There is a double-meaning or pun in Matthew’s Greek record of what Jesus was *saying* about *the birds*. The Greek word translated as *heaven* is the same word that is also translated as *air*. Both are “Ouranos.” Both meanings are acceptable. And the different translations appropriately fit their context. (It is unlikely that Jesus is talking about metaphysical *birds*. *He* is talking about ordinary *birds* that fly through *the air*.) Nevertheless, the Greek passage reads “*the kingdom of ouranos*” and “*birds of the ouranos*.”

When the *mustard seed becomes the mustard tree* it is a life-giving *tree* that provides shelter to *the birds of the air*. Jesus’s description of the *mustard tree* is similar to another *tree* described by the prophet Ezekiel. This *tree* also was likened to a *kingdom*.

Ezekiel compares the *kingdom* of Assyria to a magnificent tree that was more grand than even the trees in the garden of Eden. It too was a life-giving *tree*. And God says that this *tree* like the *kingdom* it represented is now condemned and cut down for exalting itself in the place of God. Before it was cut Ezekiel described it this way:

“All the birds of the sky nested in its twigs,  
And under its branches all the animals of the field gave birth,  
And all great nations lived under its shade.”  
(Ezekiel 31:6)

The image of the birds nesting in the branches of Assyria refers to the many kingdoms and peoples that benefitted from the structure provided by the Assyrian kingdom. In a similar image, Jesus’s main point of this short and somewhat humorous *parable* seems to be that though at present *the kingdom of heaven* appears to be so small, and unnoticed that it is nearly invisible, it will one day grow to become greater than what anyone can imagine. And when it does it will be a source of life and community just like *the mustard tree* is to *the birds of the air*. The image of *birds* coming to *nest* in and out of *the tree* is not unlike a vision the apostle John had of the new Jerusalem (the capital city of *the kingdom of heaven*) in Revelation.

“The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. In the daytime (for there will be no night there) its gates will never be closed.”  
(Revelation 21:24-25)

The *kingdom* of Assyria considered itself to be above God. It sought to rule in His place and do His job. But no *kingdom*, whatever its might and boasts can replace God’s *kingdom—the kingdom of heaven*. Jesus’s phrasing alluding to the *tree* and *kingdom* described in Ezekiel might suggest that *the kingdom of heaven* is the true and lasting *kingdom*, and that all other kingdoms however grand now will one day be cut down like long-gone *kingdom* of Assyria.

This is supported by the image of Daniel 2, where a rock made without hands destroyed the kingdoms of the world, then filled the entire earth. However, even though the Kingdom of God will one day fill the earth, there is still great benefit to the people living on earth when God's people live kingdom principles, and in so doing bring the kingdom of God to earth, through the Body of Christ. Believers in Jesus are called to be salt, which is a small portion that preserves the whole.

### **Biblical Text**

**He presented another parable to them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field; and this is smaller than all other seeds, but when it is full grown, it is larger than the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches."**