

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR DECEMBER 6

MARK 1:14-31

THE BACKGROUND

At the time Mark wrote his Gospel more than 30 years likely had passed since Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. During that time, eyewitnesses gave oral accounts of His acts, teachings, death, and resurrection. As the years passed, eyewitnesses died. The need for a written account became critical to preserve firsthand accounts of Jesus' words and deeds—particularly His death on the cross to provide salvation and His triumphant resurrection. Furthermore, early Christians began to encounter persecution. They may have wondered whether opposition was a normal experience for Jesus' followers. They may have questioned whether He was present with them and, if so, whether He had the power to help them.

At a time when Christians in Rome were at the mercy of ruthless, unstable Emperor Nero, Mark provided the church with a written account of God's saving activity in Jesus. Under the Spirit's inspiration, Mark accurately presented Jesus as God's Son with absolute power and authority, which He exercised in compassion for people's good. Jesus' seemingly tragic death actually was His voluntary self-giving to provide redemption for people who would place their faith in Him. His victorious resurrection was evidence of His power to give new life to believers. Moreover, as the living Lord He was and is present with His people to encourage, support, and sustain them.

1. MIGHTY TO SAVE (MARK 1:14-15)

Verse 14: *After John was arrested, Jesus went to Galilee, preaching the good news of God:*

Sometime after Jesus emerged from His temptation experience in the wilderness, Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee and Perea, imprisoned John the Baptist (see Mark 6:17-18). The Greek term translated *arrested* literally means “to deliver up” or “to hand over.” The forerunner's imprisonment and subsequent death (see Mark 6:27) foreshadowed the Messiah's coming suffering and death. Early Christians reading Mark's Gospel were reminded that the opposition they faced placed them in good company.

Jesus left Judea in the south and went to Galilee, the

northern part of the promised land. He began to preach the good news of God. Jesus was not taking up John's work but was beginning His ministry. The word translated *preaching* conveys continuous action and has the idea of a herald's public proclamation. The content of Jesus' message was *the good news of God*. The Greek word translated *good news* is the same term rendered “gospel” in verse 1. We get our word *evangelism* from the Greek noun. The phrase *of God* also can be translated “from God” or “about God.” Mark stressed that God was the Source of the good news Jesus proclaimed; the message was God's gospel that Jesus embodied and announced.

Verse 15: *“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe in the good news!”*

Mark summarized the content of Jesus' preaching. First, He stressed that the *time* of God's choosing had arrived. The Greek word for *time* conveys the sense of an opportune, fitting, or appropriate period. The phrase *is fulfilled* has the idea of full arrival. The moment of God's supreme activity on people's behalf had come.

Second, Jesus announced the kingdom of God had come near. God's *kingdom* is His sovereign rule. In Christ, God already had inaugurated His rule. The Greek verb rendered *has come near* conveys the idea of being so near as to be present. Jesus proclaimed that in Him, God's rule had broken into history. God's sovereign reign is present and yet awaits future fulfillment or completion.

Third, Jesus urged people to repent and believe in the good news. The Greek word translated *repent* means “to change the mind” with the further idea of changing life's direction. Behind the Greek term is a Hebrew word that means “to turn” or “to return.” Thus the Greek word has the sense of turning from sin and self-will and turning toward God in submission to His rule. To *believe in the good news* is more than intellectually accepting it as true; belief encompasses trust in and commitment to Jesus, the bearer of the good news. Belief also involves shaping life according to the gospel.

2. FOLLOWING THE LEADER (MARK 1:16-20)

Verse 16: *As He was passing along by the Sea of Galilee, He saw Simon and Andrew, Simon's brother. They were casting a net into the sea, since they were fishermen.*

Mark's account in verses 16-20 of Jesus' calling four fishermen likely reflects Peter's vivid memories. The Sea of

Galilee is a freshwater lake in the northern part of the Holy Land. It is 13 miles long and 8 miles across at its widest point. In Jesus' time, the lake was a commercial center with a flourishing fishing industry. Most Galilean roads paralleled it. Jesus walked along the lake's shore—most likely the northern shore near Capernaum [kuh PUHR nay uhm] (see 1:21). There He encountered Simon and Andrew, two fishermen, who were brothers. They were alternately casting a net from both sides of their boat to catch fish for their families and for the local market.

Verse 17: *“Follow Me,” Jesus told them, “and I will make you fish for people!”*

Jesus called Simon and Andrew to discipleship: “Follow Me” (literally, “Come behind me”). In that time, students usually chose a rabbi and asked to join him to learn from him. Jesus' seeking out men of His choice to follow Him was unusual. John's Gospel indicates the brothers had prior contact with Jesus (see John 1:35-42). Jesus' call to follow Him involved attaching oneself to Him (walking with Him) and learning from His teachings and example. Mark recorded Jesus' challenging summons for Simon and Andrew to join Him in His mission.

Jesus called the two fishermen to allow Him to equip them to fish for people. Literally, Jesus said: “I will make you to become fishers of men.” Discipleship involved a process that eventually would culminate in their bringing people into God's kingdom. In the Old Testament, the figure of fishing was used of catching people for judgment (see Jer. 16:16; Hab. 1:15-17). Jesus used the metaphor for drawing people from the sphere of evil and judgment to live under God's gracious rule.

Verse 18: *Immediately they left their nets and followed Him.*

Without hesitating, Simon and Andrew left their nets and followed Jesus. The word *immediately* illustrated Jesus' authority to command people's allegiance. This event is the first of a series that demonstrated Jesus' authority in a variety of areas. The term *followed* means “accompanied” but also indicates the men's willingness to learn from Jesus and to put His teachings into practice. One meaning of the verb is “to imitate.” The brothers' positive response to Jesus' authoritative call to discipleship was costly. At least temporarily, they left behind the relative security of their fishing business to face an uncertain future with Jesus.

Verse 19: *Going on a little farther, He saw James the son*

of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in their boat mending their nets.

Continuing along the lake's shore, Jesus encountered James and John, sons of Zebedee [ZEB uh dee], who also were fishermen. Luke wrote that they were Simon's partners in their fishing business (see Luke 5:10). In their boat near the shore, James and John were mending their nets, perhaps the heavier drag nets. The word translated *mending* referred to putting the nets in order, which would have included repairing, cleaning, and folding them in preparation for the next fishing expedition.

Verse 20: *Immediately He called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed Him.*

Jesus quickly called James and John to become His disciples, and they responded. As had Simon and Andrew, they left their vocation. At least temporarily, they also left their father Zebedee, an indication that at least some of Jesus' disciples sacrificed presence with their families to be with Him. The mention of *hired men* likely is evidence the family's fishing business was lucrative.

3. LET FREEDOM RING! (MARK 1:21-28)

Verse 21: *Then they went into Capernaum, and right away He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath and began to teach.*

Capernaum, an important village on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee about 2.5 miles west of where the Jordan River enters the lake, became the center of Jesus' ministry. The term *then* likely does not indicate the same day Jesus called the four fishermen. Probably, a period of time had elapsed between verses 20 and 21.

When Jesus and the disciples arrived in Capernaum, He quickly entered the synagogue. The Greek term rendered *right away* ("immediately") is characteristic of Mark's Gospel and conveys fast-paced action. As was Jesus' usual practice (see Luke 4:16), He went to the synagogue to worship. Synagogues were local places of assembly for the purpose of instruction and worship. The temple's destruction about 586 B.C. and the subsequent Babylonian exile probably necessitated the formation of synagogues. Because the custom was to invite a visiting teacher to speak, Jesus received the opportunity to teach.

Verse 22: *They were astonished at His teaching because, unlike the scribes, He was teaching them as one having authority.*

The people in the synagogue that day did not experience worship as usual. As Jesus spoke, they continued to be astonished at His teaching. They were accustomed to teachers' citing renowned rabbis to validate their words. Jesus' teaching contrasted sharply to the teaching of the scribes, who were experts in interpreting and applying the law. Unlike them, Jesus was teaching the people as one having authority. The Greek word translated *authority* literally means "out of (one's) being"; Jesus taught out of His innate authority to compel decision. Mark stressed Jesus' personal authority in proclaiming God's message.

Verse 23a: *Just then a man with an unclean spirit was in their synagogue.*

The phrase *just then* translates the Greek word rendered "immediately" in verses 18 and 20 and "right away" in verse 21. The effect is a rapid sequence of events. A man with an unclean spirit was in the synagogue audience and made his presence known. Literally, the man was "in an unclean spirit" in the sense of being under the spirit's control. In Mark, the phrase "unclean spirits" (Mark 1:27) and the word "demons" (1:32-34) are synonyms for evil powers under Satan's direction.

To understand the gravity of the man's condition and the fear that pervaded the synagogue scene, we need to understand people's concept of demons in that time. The general, strong belief was that disembodied evil spirits filled the earth; the atmosphere swarmed with them. They sought to enter people to wreak havoc in their lives. Demons were believed to have power to rule over every facet of life and were hostile to humans and to God's rule. In some cases, small holes were bored in people's skulls to let demons out, and the piece of bone was worn as an amulet around the individuals' necks. The Gospels emphasize Jesus' victory over these powers of darkness.

Verses 23b-24: *He cried out, "What do You have to do with us, Jesus—Nazarene? Have You come to destroy us? I know who You are—the Holy One of God!"*

Perhaps interrupting Jesus' teaching or speaking as soon as Jesus finished, the man with the unclean spirit cried out. The question, "What do You have to do with us?" has the sense of "Why are you interfering with us?" The plural *us* may refer to the unclean spirit and its victim or to unclean spirits as a group. The man—or more likely the unclean spirit through him—identified Jesus as the Nazarene [NAZ uh reen] or from Nazareth, distinguishing Him

from all other men named Jesus. The question, "Have You come to destroy us?" could be translated as an assertion: "You have come to destroy us!" Switching to the singular pronoun, the unclean spirit (see 1:25) exclaimed: "I know who You are—the Holy One of God!" The malignant power of darkness recognized Jesus as God's Son in whom the Holy Spirit was active. This *Holy One* indeed had the power to destroy unclean spirits.

Verse 25: *But Jesus rebuked him and said, "Be quiet, and come out of him!"*

Jesus addressed the unclean spirit sharply. His rebuke had the force of Divine authority. The phrase "Be quiet" translates a Greek word that literally means "be muzzled" or "be silenced." Jesus' silencing the unclean spirit may be the first occurrence in Mark's Gospel of what has been called "the messianic secret." This phrase refers to Jesus' actions to prevent being identified as God's Promised Messiah until the time of His choosing. Also, He rejected the military/political baggage that accompanied the general Jewish messianic expectations. He would not be a David-like warrior-king who would end Roman oppression. He was the Suffering Servant who would give Himself for people's redemption.

After Jesus sharply reprimanded the unclean spirit, He charged it to come out of the man. The Greek verb's tense has the force of immediacy.

Verse 26: *And the unclean spirit convulsed him, shouted with a loud voice, and came out of him.*

In response to Jesus' command, the unclean spirit first convulsed the man. The Greek word translated *convulsed* also meant "to tear." Medical writers used the word for the stomach's rotation or convulsive action in retching. Finally, the unclean spirit came out of the man. The implication is that the man was made whole.

Verse 27: *Then they were all amazed, so they began to argue with one another, saying, "What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him."*

Jewish and Gentile exorcists cast out evil spirits in Jesus' time. Other exorcists commonly identified themselves by name and then pronounced a spell or employed a magical action or formula. Jesus, however, spoke brief, authoritative commands. His startlingly different approach amazed the audience.

The people tried to make sense of what they had wit-

nessed. “What is this?” they asked. The phrase *with authority* can be taken with the words *a new teaching*, as in the HCSB translation. If so, the people recognized and acknowledged the unprecedented quality of Jesus’ words and actions (see 1:22). Possibly, the words *with authority* can describe His casting out the unclean spirit: *with authority* He commands even the unclean spirits. Jesus spoke authoritatively, and the unclean spirits were no match for His power. Jesus’ power over demons was evidence God’s kingdom had broken into history.

Verse 28: *His fame then spread throughout the entire vicinity of Galilee.*

Understandably, word of Jesus’ teaching and exorcism quickly spread throughout all Galilee. The term *then* translates the Greek word for “immediately.” The word *fame* literally means “report.” The exciting news about the authoritative new teacher spread far and wide.

4. MOVING MOUNTAINS (MARK 1:29-31)

Verse 29: *As soon as they left the synagogue, they went into Simon and Andrew’s house with James and John.*

The phrase *as soon as* translates Mark’s favorite word (literally, “immediately”) to convey fast-paced action. The group went into Simon and Andrew’s house in Capernaum.

Verse 30: *Simon’s mother-in-law was lying in bed with a fever, and they told Him about her at once.*

Simon, his wife, his mother-in-law, and Andrew shared a house. Evidently, Simon was married before Jesus called him to be a disciple.

When Jesus entered the house, someone immediately told Him Simon’s mother-in-law was sick. Her fever was so severe she was lying in bed. We probably would say, “She was burning up with fever” (see Luke 4:38). Telling Jesus about her condition implied faith that He could and would help her.

Verse 31: *So He went to her, took her by the hand, and raised her up. The fever left her, and she began to serve them.*

Jesus’ taking her by the hand was a compassionate touch (see Mark 1:40-41). He could have healed her with spoken words (see 2:11). When Jesus helped the woman stand, the fever left her, demonstrating His authority over disease. He also emphasized the dignity and worth of women, who occupied a lowly status in the society of that time.

This passage, occurring as it does early in Mark’s Gos-

pel, shows Jesus’ ministry was always characterized by service and Jesus always had an expectation that His followers’ lives also would be marked by service. Mark later emphasized the difficulty of Jesus’ disciples in accepting the concept of what service meant for Him and for them (see 8:31-33; 9:33-37; 10:32-45).

Jesus healed numerous people “with various diseases” and cast demons out of many possessed people, displaying His authority (1:34). He silenced the demons “because they knew Him.” He did not want His identity as Messiah to be known prematurely.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR DECEMBER 13

MARK 2:15-28

THE BACKGROUND

John, an Elijah-like prophetic figure, appeared in the wilderness of Judea. He preached people's need to repent and to be baptized. On learning of John's ministry, Jesus left His home in Nazareth and traveled to the place where John was baptizing. Although Jesus had not sinned and thus had no need to repent, on His insistence John baptized Him in the Jordan River, in part to signal the beginning of Jesus' redemptive ministry (see Mark 1:4-11). Immediately following His baptism, Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness, where He experienced real temptations and overcame them (see 1:12-13).

Emerging from the wilderness, Jesus went to Galilee and began proclaiming God's "good news" (1:14)—in Jesus, God's sovereign rule had broken into history. Jesus called people to repent of their sins and to "believe in the good news" of God's grace (1:15). In the course of beginning His ministry, Jesus called four fishermen to be His disciples. In response to His authoritative call, they left their vocations and families to follow Him (see 1:16-20).

In a synagogue in Capernaum, Jesus amazed the congregation with His authoritative teaching. Then He exhibited His authority over unclean spirits by exorcizing such a spirit from a man present in the synagogue. As a result, Jesus' reputation spread widely (see 1:21-28). He healed Simon's mother-in-law; then He healed sick people brought to Him and exorcised demons from others (see 1:29-34). In the course of an extensive preaching ministry in Galilee, Jesus demonstrated His compassion and power by touching a leprous man and healing him (see 1:35-44). As a consequence, so many people pressed around Him that He could not enter towns openly. Even so, people "would come to Him from everywhere" (1:45).

Jesus was immensely popular with the common people. His three-pronged ministry of teaching, preaching, and healing demonstrated His authority and compassion. The force of His personality and the power He exercised drew people to Him. Soon, however, a dark shadow would begin to fall across Jesus' path.

1. REACH OUT TO SINNERS (MARK 2:15-17)

Verse 15: *While He was reclining at the table in Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were also guests with Jesus and His disciples, because there were many who were following Him.*

Luke wrote that after Levi answered Jesus' call to discipleship, he hosted a festive meal in his home in Jesus' honor (see Luke 5:29). According to the custom of the time, a low table was spread with food. Guests reclined on couches with their bodies extending away from the table. They propped themselves on their left elbows and with their right hands reached for food and fed themselves. Thus, Jesus and the other diners were reclining at the table, probably in an oblong hall or perhaps a courtyard. Among the guests were many tax collectors and sinners as well as Jesus' disciples. The *tax collectors* doubtless had been Levi's coworkers. *Sinners* were people who did not keep the law—the Commandments and the oral tradition that had been added to them—or could not do so because of their occupations. Some may have given up on the attempt because they could not bear that heavy load (see Matt. 23:2-4). The term also could indicate people characterized by moral failure. In any case the term referred to whom the society of orthodox people considered outcasts.

The term *disciples* means "students" or "learners" but also involves commitment to Jesus, adoption of His attitude or approach, and ministry for Him. Mark's frequent use of the word underlines the importance he placed on discipleship. That *many . . . were following Him* attested to Jesus' popularity at this early point in His ministry.

Verse 16: *When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that He was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they asked His disciples, "Why does He eat with tax collectors and sinners?"*

In Jesus' time, when someone hosted a banquet or festive meal, entries to the dining place were left open so those outside could come in and observe the guests as they ate. On the occasion in Levi's house, some scribes of the Pharisees entered. *Scribes* were experts in the law; they taught, interpreted, and applied it. *Pharisees* devoted themselves to strict observance of the law—the Ten Commandments and the oral tradition that had been added. They considered the oral tradition as sacred and binding as the Commandments. During the time Jesus walked the land of the Bible, the Pharisees were the largest Jewish party and controlled the synagogues. They exercised great influence over the people. Not all Pharisees were scribes,

but many scribes were Pharisees.

When the scribes observed Jesus eating with sinners and tax collectors, they cloaked an accusation or indictment in the form of a question to the disciples: Why was Jesus eating with the dregs of Jewish society? His sharing a meal with them signified His accepting them and extending friendship to them. In addition, associating with them made Jesus ceremonially unclean. The food well may not have been prepared according to Jewish requirements, or the vessels may not have been ritually clean, or tithes may not have been paid on the food. From the scribes' perspective no legitimate, self-respecting teacher would keep such company! Observe that in the first conflict account in 2:1-12, the scribes silently, internally accused Jesus of blasphemy. In verse 16, they escalated the conflict by verbalizing to Jesus' disciples their complaint or charge. Opposition became open.

Verse 17: *When Jesus heard this, He told them, "Those who are well don't need a doctor, but the sick do need one. I didn't come to call the righteous, but sinners."*

Jesus responded to the scribes' caustic question with what may have been a proverbial saying whose truth was self-evident. Doctors did not make house calls to well people. Physicians went to where the sick individuals were in order to treat them. Jesus stated He had not come to call people aloof in their smug self-righteousness; He had come to seek and to save sinners (see Luke 19:10). The scribes shunned people they considered sinners in order to avoid becoming tainted; Jesus sought out people aware of their sins so He could offer the cleansing of God's forgiveness.

2. LIVE WITH A NEW ATTITUDE (MARK 2:18-22)

Verse 18: *Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. People came and asked Him, "Why do John's disciples and the Pharisees' disciples fast, but Your disciples do not fast?"*

Verses 18-22 point to the cross as a time of sadness for the disciples. Even so, the verses also point to another time of joy because the resurrection followed the crucifixion and because of what Christ's death means.

The Jews were required to fast once a year, on the Day of Atonement. They sometimes fasted at other times, such as to mourn personal loss or to express repentance. Pharisees, however, fasted twice a week—on Mondays

and Thursdays from 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. The statement *John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting* may indicate Levi's meal took place on one of the weekly fast days. The question of the people who approached Jesus was an accusation. John's followers and the Pharisees' disciples—probably people who adopted the Pharisees' practice of fasting—demonstrated their piety by fasting twice a week. Why were Jesus' disciples not as conscientious? Of course, the questioners implied Jesus was not much of a teacher.

Note the continued acceleration of conflict and opposition. First, scribes accused Jesus in thought form. Then they approached Jesus' disciples with their criticism. Next legalistic religionists confronted Jesus directly.

Verse 19: *Jesus said to them, "The wedding guests cannot fast while the groom is with them, can they? As long as they have the groom with them, they cannot fast."*

Jesus followed the rabbinic practice of answering a question with a question. His question anticipated an answer of no. Wedding guests did not fast as they celebrated with the groom. Jewish weddings were followed by a week of feasting and joyous celebration. Jesus answered His own question. The groom's presence called for festivity; fasting was out of place. In fact, in Jewish teaching, the wedding symbolized the future day of salvation, a day of joyous celebration.

Verse 20: *But the time will come when the groom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day.*

Jesus elaborated on His brief parable with an allusion to what lay ahead for Him and His disciples. The future time . . . when the groom would be taken away from them was a thinly veiled reference to Jesus' coming crucifixion. Fasting as an expression of sorrow would be appropriate in that day. Significantly, at this early point in Jesus' ministry, the shadow of the cross fell across His path. He was fully aware of what lay ahead.

Verse 21: *No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. Otherwise, the new patch pulls away from the old cloth, and a worse tear is made.*

Jesus used two additional parables in quick succession to contrast the old legalistic system of Judaism to God's new redemptive activity in Him. Judaism could not contain the fresh, creative revelation that God's kingdom had broken into history and that salvation was available in Jesus. The old garment symbolized Judaism, which was not wrong or evil but had served its purpose. What Jesus brought fulfilled

and surpassed the Old Testament revelation. To try to patch on to Judaism the new (fresh, new in quality) Jesus brought would be like sewing a piece of unshrunk cloth to an old garment or robe. As the new patch shrank, it would tear away from the surrounding cloth, creating a worse tear.

Verse 22: *And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost as well as the skins. But new wine is for fresh wineskins."*

Again, wise people did not put new wine into old wineskins. As the wineskin containers made from whole goat hides aged, they hardened and became brittle. In the fermentation process, new wine would emit gases and because the old wineskins could not expand, they would explode, spilling the wine. New wineskins had the elasticity to expand as the new wine fermented, so the wine was preserved. The *new* (totally different) revelation Jesus brought could not be restricted to Judaism's hardened traditions but demanded freedom for new forms of expression.

3. MEET OTHERS' NEEDS (MARK 2:23-28)

Verse 23: *On the Sabbath He was going through the grainfields, and His disciples began to make their way picking some heads of grain.*

Sometime after the exchange concerning fasting and Jesus' emphasis on the newness of the revelation He brought, on the Sabbath He was walking through the grainfields. Likely, Jesus and the disciples were walking on a path normally left through a grainfield, so that standing grain was on both sides of them. As they walked along, the disciples plucked some heads of grain, probably wheat, rye, or barley. Jewish law allowed travelers to pluck grain from fields if they only used their hands; they could relieve hunger but could not use a sickle (see Deut. 23:25). Thus, the disciples were not stealing grain.

Verse 24: *The Pharisees said to Him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?"*

Evidently the Jewish religious leaders had begun to hound Jesus' steps, looking for anything to use against Him. Pharisees watching Him and His disciples walk through the fields thought they had something. These sticklers for observing all the oral tradition (rules and regulations) that had been added to the Commandments thought they had caught the disciples in a gross violation of the law, and they viewed Je-

sus as guilty of condoning the disciples' behavior.

Under 39 categories, the oral tradition contained numerous rules concerning what constituted work on the Sabbath. To the Pharisees, the disciples' actions constituted reaping, winnowing, threshing, and preparing a meal—all forbidden activities on the Sabbath. The religious watchdogs had the disciples and Jesus where they wanted them—or so they thought.

Verses 25-26: *He said to them, "Have you never read what David and those who were with him did when he was in need and hungry—how he entered the house of God in the time of Abiathar the high priest and ate the sacred bread—which is not lawful for anyone to eat except the priests—and also gave some to his companions?"*

Instead of chastising His disciples for their supposedly gross violations of the Sabbath, Jesus answered the Pharisees' question with a question. He directed them to their Scriptures, with which they professed to be thoroughly familiar. Jesus referred to the account in 1 Samuel 21:1-6.

David and his men had been in need and hungry (Mark 2:25), so he entered the house of God (2:26) and asked for food—"five loaves of bread or whatever can be found" (1 Sam. 21:3). The only bread available was the "consecrated bread" or "the bread of the Presence" (21:4,6). Twelve loaves, arranged in two rows of six each, were always kept on a table set in front of the holy of holies in the tabernacle (see Ex. 25:30; Lev. 24:5-9). These loaves were replaced every Sabbath. Only the priests could eat the bread that had been removed from the table (see Lev. 24:9). David, however, ate the sacred bread . . . and also gave some to his companions.

Jesus' argument was that the Scriptures never condemned David for his action, which showed the Pharisees' rigid interpretation of the law was not scripturally correct. To Jesus, meeting human needs was more important than keeping the ceremonial law—always.

Verse 27: *Then He told them, "The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath."*

By stressing God's purpose in establishing the Sabbath, Jesus addressed the charge His disciples were breaking it. He asserted that the Sabbath was made for man. God had not commanded a day of rest so people would be burdened with a crushing load of regulations; He set the day aside for people's benefit.

Verse 28: *Therefore the Son of Man is Lord even of the*

Sabbath.”

Jesus referred to Himself as *the Son of Man*, a title that referred to His humanity and His Deity. As Deity, He had the authority to determine proper observance of the Sabbath.

Mark did not record the Pharisees' reaction to Jesus' defense of His disciples and Himself. We legitimately may surmise that they were enraged. Not only had He indirectly charged that their interpretation of Sabbath observance was wrong, but also He had claimed authority to determine correct observance. Undoubtedly, they would not let Him go unchallenged.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR DECEMBER 20

LUKE 2:8-15,25-35

THE BACKGROUND

No prophet had appeared in Israel for about four hundred years. The Jews chafed under Roman rule and longed for the coming God's Promised Messiah whom they believed would free them from oppression. In the most unlikely manner from a human perspective, God set in motion the process of fulfilling His promise of the Deliverer who would save people from their sins (see Luke 1:5-25). Zechariah, an aged priest, was performing the probably once-in-a-lifetime privilege of offering incense in the temple's holy place. He and Elizabeth, his elderly wife, were "righteous" and "without blame" (1:6-7). Although Zechariah had prayed for a son, the couple was childless. Suddenly, the angel Gabriel appeared beside the altar of incense and announced that God was about to answer the priest's prayer. Elizabeth would bear a son. Though Zechariah doubted, after he returned home Elizabeth conceived.

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God dispatched Gabriel to Nazareth in Galilee (see 1:26-38). There, the angel announced to a young virgin named Mary that by God's grace she would be the Messiah's mother. God's creative power would cause her to conceive. Gabriel said: "The holy One to be born will be called the Son of God" (1:35). The angel also told Mary that her relative Elizabeth, who had been thought to be well past childbearing age, was six-month's pregnant. Mary submitted to God's will for her.

Mary traveled from Nazareth in Galilee to the Judean hill country to visit Elizabeth, perhaps to compare notes with her (see 1:39-45). In response to Elizabeth's acknowledgment of God's blessing on Mary and her Child, Mary sang a song of praise to God (see 1:46-55). She praised God for favoring her and acknowledged that He humbled the mighty and exalted the lowly. Through what He was doing, He was helping "His servant Israel" (1:54). After about three months, Mary returned to Nazareth. Soon thereafter, Elizabeth gave birth to a son, and she and Zechariah named him John as Gabriel had directed (see 1:57-66). Zechariah prophesied concerning John, who would be a prophet, and Mary's Child, who would be the light of salvation dispelling people's darkness (see 1:67-79).

Luke summarized John's development. He "grew up and became spiritually strong" (1:80). John lived in the wilderness until he began his public ministry. Then Luke dropped back in time to present the account of Jesus' birth.

1. SEEK VERIFICATION (LUKE 2:8-15)

Verse 8: *In the same region, shepherds were staying out in the fields and keeping watch at night over their flock.*

In a location near Bethlehem, some shepherds were out in the open guarding their flock during the night. Normally, sheep were kept in the fields from March to November. Because Jerusalem was only about five miles from Bethlehem, one suggestion is that the sheep were sacrificial animals kept for use in the temple.

Verse 9: *Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.*

Suddenly, an angel of the Lord stood near them. The word *angel* means "messenger." The indefinite *an* may indicate this angel was distinct from Gabriel, the angel who stood in God's presence (see Luke 1:19,26). The glory of the Lord that shone around the shepherds was God's Shekinah glory—the brightness of His presence perhaps exhibited in a luminous cloud. Understandably, the angel's appearing suddenly and the accompanying brilliant radiance terrified the shepherds. "They feared a great fear" is a literal translation.

Verse 10: *But the angel said to them, "Don't be afraid, for look, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people:*

The angel tried to dispel the shepherds' fear as Gabriel had done when he appeared to the startled, frightened Zechariah and to the young virgin Mary. The unnamed angel encouraged the shepherds by beginning his speech with the same words Gabriel had spoken: "Don't be afraid" (see 1:13). Then he gave the reason for his counsel.

The angel used the Greek word translated *look* to call attention to what followed. His message was the most monumental news Israel—and the world—has ever received. The good news he announced was the greatest possible proclamation, for it would produce great joy and would be for all people everywhere, the phrase *all the people* applied first to the Jews (see Rom. 1:16). The announcement for which they had longed and prayed was being given. God was fulfilling His promise of the Messiah.

Verse 11: *today a Savior, who is Messiah the Lord, was born for you in the city of David.*

The angel declared the content of the good news. That day, in Bethlehem, David's city, a unique Baby had been born. The angel gave a threefold description of Him. The Baby was the Savior. In that time, the word *savior* was used of benefactors and rulers. The Baby born in Bethlehem, however, would save people on a deeper level; He would save them from their sins (see Matt. 1:21). He would provide the incalculable benefit of God's gracious forgiveness.

The Newborn also was the long-awaited Messiah. The Greek term *Christos* translated the Hebrew word *Messiah*, which means "anointed one." In Old Testament Israel, prophets, priests, and kings were anointed with oil to consecrate them for their specific tasks. The title *Messiah* came to designate God's promised Deliverer for His people. Some Jews expected a priestly Messiah. Most, however, looked for a military/political figure in David's mold who would free them from Roman occupation and restore Israel to power and prominence. Jesus, of course, would not be the kind of Messiah they were expecting; He would be the Suffering Servant who would give Himself vicariously for people's redemption.

The Infant also was Lord. In the Greek text, *Messiah* (Christ) *the Lord* literally is "Christ Lord," perhaps conveying the idea of "Christ and Lord" or "the Christ, the Lord." In the Septuagint (a major Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures), the word *Lord* (Greek *Kurios*) translates the name *Yahweh*. Applied to Jesus, the word emphasizes His Deity. The Baby born in Bethlehem was fully human, but He also was fully Deity.

One short phrase in the angel's announcement of good news must have both shocked and elated the shepherds. The angel said, "A Savior, who is Messiah the Lord, was born for you." Whereas the phrase "all the people" (2:10) referred to the Jews, the words *for you* (2:11) likely specified the shepherds.

In the Old Testament, shepherding was a respectable vocation. David, Israel's greatest king, had been a shepherd in his youth (see 1 Sam. 16:11). Later, David would write that God was his Shepherd (see Ps. 23:1). In Ezekiel 34:11-16, God declared He would be the Shepherd of His people; and in 34:23-24, He promised to send His servant David to shepherd His people. In Jesus' time, however, shepherds were regarded as despised members of Jewish

society. Because their occupation prevented them from keeping the Jews' ceremonial rules and regulations, they were ceremonially unclean; thus, they could not worship in the temple. They generally were regarded as dishonest. Although the shepherds to whom the angel appeared were outcasts and viewed as nobodies by many of their own people, they well may have been devout men who looked for the Messiah's coming.

Verse 12: *This will be the sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped snugly in cloth and lying in a feeding trough."*

The angel gave the shepherds a sign by which they would be able to identify the newborn Baby. More than one baby may have been born and wrapped snugly in cloth. Only one Baby, however, would have an animals' feeding trough as a cradle.

Verse 13: *Suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying:*

Suddenly a great number of the heavenly host joined the angel who addressed the shepherds and formed a celestial choir. In the Old Testament, the word *host* could refer to the sun, moon, and stars; to God's army; and to angels. The heavenly multitude praised God, which in this context most likely indicates praise for Jesus' birth—God's coming among humans to provide salvation.

Verse 14: *Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to people He favors!*

The host's pronouncement in poetic form indicates it was a hymn or psalm. The word *glory* conveys the ideas of praise or honor—an acknowledgment of God's character revealed as redemptive. The reference to God's being in the highest heaven stressed His transcendence or separateness from humans because of His sovereignty, majesty, and holiness.

The word *peace* expresses more than the absence of conflict. It has the idea of wholeness or soundness under God's rule. Because of God's activity in Christ, people have access to spiritual wholeness. Only God can provide the salvation and spiritual soundness people desperately need.

Verse 15: *When the angels had left them and returned to heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go straight to Bethlehem and see what has happened, which the Lord has made known to us."*

After the angelic host returned to heaven, the shepherds began to talk among themselves and repeatedly said: "Let's go straight to Bethlehem." Their words expressed excitement

and wonder and had a note of urgency. They wanted to see for themselves the truth of the angel's message. Interestingly, the shepherds ascribed to God the revelation of Jesus' birth. The angel was God's herald, but the Lord was the Source of the wonderful good news that included all people.

2. HEAR TESTIMONY (LUKE 2:25-32)

Verse 25: *There was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. This man was righteous and devout, looking forward to Israel's consolation, and the Holy Spirit was on him.*

When Joseph and Mary took Jesus to the temple to perform the prescribed ritual for firstborn sons (see Luke 2:27), they encountered a man . . . whose name was Simeon [SIM ih uhn]. As did Zechariah, Elizabeth, Joseph, and Mary (and probably the shepherds), Simeon represented the faithful among God's people—Judaism's best. Luke gave a comprehensive description of this truly pious man. First, Simeon was righteous. The Greek term described a person who kept Divine and human laws and thus was upright, just, and virtuous. Simeon was what he should have been in relation to God and others.

Second, Simeon was devout. He had deep reverence for God and was careful to perform his religious duties well. Third, Simeon was looking forward to Israel's consolation. He eagerly anticipated the Messiah's coming.

Fourth, the Holy Spirit was on him. Simeon evidently experienced the Spirit's continuing presence and guidance as he faithfully awaited the fulfillment of God's promise to send the Messiah.

Verse 26: *It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he saw the Lord's Messiah.*

The Spirit had given Simeon a magnificent promise that he doubtless treasured and that must have given added meaning to each day. Any day could be the day when the Messiah came. The Spirit assured Simeon he would not die before he saw the Lord's Messiah. During his lifetime, he would have the matchless privilege of seeing the long-awaited Messiah.

Verse 27: *Guided by the Spirit, he entered the temple complex. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to perform for Him what was customary under the law,*

Obedying the Spirit's promptings, Simeon entered the temple complex. God's guiding hand was behind everything that was happening. He was orchestrating His supreme redemptive event. He had sent the angel Gabriel

to Zechariah and Mary. He had used the emperor's decree to fulfill the prophecy that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem and had facilitated the announcement of Jesus' birth to shepherds. Then He set the stage for Simeon's praise for God's gift and his prophetic pronouncement concerning Jesus. Luke used the phrase *the parents* to indicate Joseph's and Mary's roles as people would commonly perceive them. The term *parents* in no way denies the virgin birth. It was the natural way to refer to Joseph and Mary.

Verse 28: *Simeon took Him up in his arms, praised God, and said:*

Evidently God prompted Mary to trust Simeon enough to allow him to take her Baby and hold Him in his arms. Simeon first praised God. The Greek word translated *praised* comes from a term that means "to speak well of" or "to glorify." Simeon's praise took the form of a prayer of thanksgiving.

Verse 29: *Now, Master, You can dismiss Your slave in peace, according to Your word.*

Simeon addressed God as *Master*. The Greek term conveys the idea of absolute ownership or total power. It has the sense of One who is sovereign Ruler. In this verse, the word does not have the force of a tyrant who wields power ruthlessly and arbitrarily. Simeon addressed God as sovereign Lord of his life. The Greek term rendered *slave* conveys the sense of a person's being bound to another and thus subject to the master's will. It has the idea of total subservience. Simeon had put himself at God's disposal and obeyed His commands.

The Greek word translated *dismiss* also means "let go" or "send away." It could have the sense of setting a person free or of releasing the individual. One view is that Simeon was acknowledging God's discharging him from his task of watching for the long-awaited Messiah. Many interpreters, however, view Simeon's words as referring to his death, which also would mark his being released from his long vigil. God had kept His word; Simeon could die in peace. Simeon's life was complete; his work was finished, and his hope had been fulfilled. Thus, he could die without experiencing frustration and regret.

Verse 30: *For my eyes have seen Your salvation.*

In looking at the Baby in his arms, Simeon saw God's salvation. The phrase *Your salvation* acknowledged God as the Source of people's redemption. God was in the process of doing for humans what they could not do for themselves.

Out of sheer love (see John 3:16) and grace (see Eph. 2:8), God provided the only way to Himself (see John 14:6). Jesus was God's Deliverer who would provide *salvation*. Jesus would deliver people who received Him—not from Roman oppression but from sin's bondage, which was their deepest need.

Verses 31-32: *You have prepared it in the presence of all peoples—a light for revelation to the Gentiles and glory to Your people Israel.*

Simeon had stated what the Messiah's coming meant to him. Then he expressed what that coming meant for the world. He declared God had prepared His salvation in the presence of all peoples—Jews and Gentiles (see Isa. 52:10). Jesus would be a light for revelation to the Gentiles (see Isa. 9:1-2; Matt. 4:15-16). The good news of salvation in Jesus would be available to all people (see John 10:16). God's salvation through Jesus would be glory to [God's] people Israel. God worked through the Jews to make salvation available to all. Jesus was a Jew, but He was the Man for all people. God used true Judaism—Judaism at its best—through which to make redemption available.

3. MAKE YOUR CHOICE (LUKE 2:33-35)

Verse 33: *His father and mother were amazed at what was being said about Him.*

Luke referred to Joseph and Mary as Jesus' father and mother. Luke used the word *father* to indicate Joseph's commonly perceived role. This designation was the natural way to refer to Joseph without a more lengthy explanation of his being Jesus' legal father. Luke's use of the term *father* was not a denial of the virgin birth.

Why were Joseph and Mary amazed at what Simeon said about Jesus? After all, both had received the revelation of who Mary's Son would be (see Matt. 1:20-21; Luke 1:31-33). Both had heard the shepherds' astonishing report (see 2:10-11,17-19). Most likely what most amazed Joseph and Mary was the prophecy that Jesus would be the Savior of Gentiles as well as of Jews. The general Jewish expectation was that the Messiah would deliver His people from Roman occupation. Yet soon after Jesus' birth, Simeon emphasized Gentiles' access to the salvation God was making available in Jesus.

Verses 34-35: *Then Simeon blessed them and told His mother Mary: "Indeed, this child is destined to cause the fall and rise of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be*

opposed—and a sword will pierce your own soul—that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed."

Simeon pronounced a blessing on Joseph and Mary. Then he addressed Mary with prophecies about Jesus. Jesus would cause many in Israel to fall. They would have to decide whether He was God's Son and the Promised Deliverer. If they rejected Him, they would place themselves outside God's redeeming grace. Conversely, He would cause *many* Jews to rise. People who placed faith in Him would enter God's family and kingdom.

Furthermore, Jesus would be a sign that would be opposed. Because Jesus did not fit people's preconceived molds of what the Messiah should be and how He should act, many would speak against Him. People's decisions about Jesus would reveal the thoughts of their hearts—what they really were deep down inside. Thus, all who encountered Him would face a crisis of decision.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR DECEMBER 27

MARK 4:14-32

THE BACKGROUND

After His baptism and His temptation experience, Jesus embarked on His public ministry. In Galilee, He preached the good news that in Him God's sovereign rule had broken into history. In light of that truth, He urged people to repent and order their lives according to the gospel. Then He called four fishermen to be His disciples (see Mark 1:9-20).

Jesus continued His ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing. In the synagogue in Capernaum, He exorcised an unclean spirit from a man. His authority over unclean spirits amazed the synagogue audience, and word of His power quickly spread throughout Galilee (see 1:21-28). Jesus healed Simon's mother-in-law and many others. Then He engaged in a preaching and healing tour in Galilee (see 1:29-39). He cleansed a leper and instructed him not to publicize his healing, but the man told his story widely (see 1:40-45). As a result, Jesus' popularity with the common people mushroomed.

The Jews' religious leaders quickly began to criticize and then to openly accuse Jesus of ignoring and breaking their law. In 2:1-3:6, Mark recorded five conflict episodes in which the religious leaders' opposition to Jesus intensified. It began with their unspoken charge of blasphemy and escalated to the beginning of a plot to kill Him.

1. GOD'S WORD IS SOWN (MARK 4:14-20)

Verse 14: *The sower sows the word.*

The sower represented the person who proclaimed the good news of God's redemptive activity in Jesus. The term *word* referred to the message that God's reign had broken into history in Jesus (see 2:2; see also 1:14-15).

Verse 15: *These are the ones along the path where the word is sown: when they hear, immediately Satan comes and takes away the word sown in them.*

Some seed fell along the hard-packed common path that extended between strips of the cultivated field. Before the seeds could be plowed under, birds quickly ate them (see 4:4). This tightly compressed soil represented people who heard the good news but because of hardness of heart did not consider it seriously. Failure to be open to receive the gospel allowed Satan the opportunity to remove it from

their consciousness, to convince them it was unimportant.

Verses 16-17: *And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, immediately they receive it with joy. But they have no root in themselves; they are short-lived. When affliction or persecution comes because of the word, they immediately stumble.*

Other seed fell on rocky ground (4:16)—a thin layer of soil covering an underlying layer of rock. Seed sown on such soil germinated and grew quickly. Because the soil was not deep enough for proper root systems, however, the plants soon withered in the scorching heat (see 4:5-6). This shallow soil represented people who heard the gospel and immediately made a superficial, emotional response to it, receiving it with joy. Evidently these people liked what they heard about blessings but failed to consider the gospel's demands. Thus their response lacked the depth of commitment necessary for perseverance as Jesus' followers. When they experienced affliction (crushing pressure) and persecution (persistent harassment) as believers, they stumbled (4:17). Opposition caused them to falter, and their positive response was short-lived. They responded quickly, and they gave up quickly. Their initial response to the gospel was brief, inadequate, and unproductive. It was not saving faith.

Verses 18-19: *Others are sown among thorns; these are the ones who hear the word, but the worries of this age, the seduction of wealth, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.*

Other seed fell among thorns (4:18). The farmer had cleared the ground—on the surface. Below the surface, however, roots of thorn bushes remained. The thorn bushes grew more rapidly than the grain and were sturdier, so the thorn bushes "choked" the grain (see 4:7). The soil that produced thorn bushes represented people who made sincere commitments to Jesus but did not progress beyond that beginning; they failed to move toward spiritual maturity. They became caught up in the worries (anxieties) of this age (4:19)—the distractions of the present evil time. They listened to the siren song of wealth; they fell victim to its deceitfulness in promising fulfillment. Such interests crowded into their lives and choked the word; thus, they were unproductive. In my opinion Jesus likely did not mean these people were unsaved; however, they were unfruitful. They were unproductive believers. Others interpret the seed sown among the thorns as descriptive of unbelievers.

Verse 20: *But the ones sown on good ground are those who hear the word, welcome it, and produce a crop: 30, 60, and 100 times what was sown."*

Still other seed fell on good or fertile ground (see 4:8). This productive soil represented people who heard the gospel, embraced it, and became productive as Jesus' followers. The phrase *30, 60, and 100 times what was sown* indicates Jesus' recognition that committed believers' productivity varies according to ability.

Jesus' parable expressed His awareness that not everyone would accept His message. Yet the parable offered encouragement to people who proclaimed the gospel. Some people would hear the good news, receive it, and become productive believers. The parable also called for self-evaluation, for decision. People who heard were faced with assessing their response to the gospel. Which kind of soil were they?

2. GOD'S WORD IS HEADED (MARK 4:21-25)

Verse 21: *He also said to them, "Is a lamp brought in to be put under a basket or under a bed? Isn't it to be put on a lampstand?"*

Jesus told a second brief parable using a familiar household item. The *lamp* likely was a clay bowl-shaped vessel filled with olive oil. A pinched spout supported a wick usually made of twisted flax. Jesus stated the obvious. People did not bring such a lamp into the typical one-room house to place it under a basket or under an elevated bed. Rather, they placed it on a lampstand—probably a little ledge in a wall designed for the purpose of holding a lamp. The lamp's purpose was to give light for the room, not to be extinguished by the basket or hidden under the bed.

Verse 22: *For nothing is concealed except to be revealed, and nothing hidden except to come to light.*

The point of Jesus' parable was that He had come to reveal the arrival of God's rule in Him. At present, His teaching in parables temporarily hid this truth from opponents; after His death and resurrection, the disciples would declare the truth more openly so people could understand it more easily. A slightly different view is that Jesus meant the light He brought concerning the presence of God's kingdom in Him seemed small and insignificant. In the future, however, God would reveal that light's brightness and intensity.

Verse 23: *If anyone has ears to hear, he should listen!*"

People who heard Jesus' parables were to pay close attention to what He said. Literally, the Greek text has, "If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear." Behind the Greek word translated *hear* may well be the Hebrew concept of acting on or obeying what was heard. Thus to listen was much more than to take in sound waves; it was to understand and to act on the truth a person heard.

Verse 24: *Then He said to them, "Pay attention to what you hear. By the measure you use, it will be measured and added to you.*

Jesus again cautioned His hearers to pay attention. The repetition of the warning conveyed urgency. Hearers were to have spiritual perception in order to grasp His meaning. They were to consider His words carefully.

The phrase *by the measure you use* may refer to a person's openness to the truth Jesus revealed. The degree of people's attentiveness and response to Him is a matter of their choice and determines how much of the truth they receive. The phrase *added to you* refers to an increase in understanding based on a greater *measure* of receptivity. The picture is of people who bring containers to Jesus of sizes they have chosen to have them filled. The amount each receives will correspond to the size of the container each brings.

An alternate view is that the phrase *the measure you use* refers to Jesus' followers' sharing the good news. They will receive more truth in proportion to the degree they make it known to others. Observe that Matthew recorded that Jesus also used the expression within the context of judging (Matt. 7:1-2).

Verse 25: *For to the one who has, it will be given, and from the one who does not have, even what he has will be taken away."*

Jesus gave a promise and a warning. People who pay attention to His words, exercise spiritual perception, and act on those words will receive added understanding and insights. They will grow spiritually. People who ignore or reject Jesus' words progressively lose spiritual insight. They experience spiritual atrophy. To use a different analogy, they continue to close their eyes to the light until they become blind—the ultimate self-inflicted tragedy.

3. GOD'S KINGDOM GROWS (MARK 4:26-32)

Verse 26: *"The kingdom of God is like this," He said. "A*

man scatters seed on the ground;

Jesus used many parables to reveal the nature of God's kingdom or rule. He presented God's sovereign rule as present yet future. Mark included two parables of the kingdom in 4:26-32. These parables about seeds teach the hidden but certain growth of God's kingdom. Interpreters have referred to Mark 4:26-29 as the parable of the seed growing secretly or spontaneously. Jesus again used the familiar figure of a farmer who scattered seeds on the ground and plowed them under (see 4:1-8). The sower represented believers who proclaimed the gospel.

Verse 27: *he sleeps and rises—night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows—he doesn't know how.*

As the farmer went about his usual daily activities including tending his fields, the seed he had planted sprouted and grew. However, he could not force the seed to produce a quick harvest. In like manner, believers were to announce the good news and patiently await the results of their labor.

Verse 28: *The soil produces a crop by itself—first the blade, then the head, and then the ripe grain on the head.*

The growth process occurred. The soil produced a crop by itself. The soil contained the nutrients necessary for germination and growth. Without the seed, however, no harvest could occur. Elements such as sunshine, rain, nutrients, and careful cultivation would produce nothing without seed. Once planted, the seed proceeded at its own pace in the normal manner. Jesus did not minimize the importance of spreading the gospel; the seed of the good news had to be sown. Yet human effort did not bring the harvest; God was and is active in His sovereign power to ensure His kingdom's growth. Believers are to declare the good news; the results of their efforts are God's responsibility.

Verse 29: *But as soon as the crop is ready, he sends for the sickle, because harvest has come."*

Eventually, the grain reached full maturity; in due time, harvesting began. The harvest seems to be Jesus' major emphasis in the parable. His followers were to proclaim the gospel in the confidence that God would bring a harvest of people who would believe and place themselves under His rule (see 4:8,20). What an encouragement to Jesus' laborers who sow the gospel seed!

Verse 30: *And He said: "How can we illustrate the kingdom of God, or what parable can we use to describe it?"*

To stimulate or maintain His hearers' interest, Jesus

asked a rhetorical question. The Greek word translated *illustrate* means "compare" or "liken." Similarly, the term *parable* conveyed the idea of a story for the purpose of comparison. The parallel questions in this verse drew attention to what followed.

Verses 31-32: *It's like a mustard seed that, when sown in the soil, is smaller than all the seeds on the ground. And when sown, it comes up and grows taller than all the vegetables, and produces large branches, so that the birds of the sky can nest in its shade."*

During the time Jesus walked the land of the Bible, a mustard seed proverbially represented the smallest possible thing. When the mustard seed germinated, it grew to be taller than all the vegetables, producing large branches. It grew into a tree-like herb that could reach a height of 12 feet. Jesus' parable contrasted a small beginning to great results. The kingdom's growth would be disproportionate to its beginning. When Jesus spoke, God's kingdom was small numerically. Eventually, it would grow to encompass countless believers; it would include all people who responded positively to the gospel.

Jesus continued to teach through the consistent use of parables, adapting them to the people's level of understanding (see 4:33-34). Much about God's kingdom remained veiled, especially to people indifferent or opposed to Jesus.