

## Mark 4 within Mark's Gospel

Mark 4: what is happening at this stage in Mark's story?

Read 3:20-35 to see the responses Jesus is getting.

How might this match the parable of the sower?

Matthew and Luke have many parables,

but there are only two full story parables in Mark.

The other is the tenants in the vineyard, at 12:1-9.

If the sower is a lens into the opening part of Mark's story,

how does the tenant parable help us to see the latter part?

What two food products emerge from the two scenes,

and how might these belong together?

'Listen,' says Jesus (4.3, 23).

Where, famously, does the Old Testament say, 'Hear'?

How might this connect with Jesus' parable of the sower?

# Seeds of Insight

## *The Sower (Mark 4)*



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(Week Two) This appears to be a parable about parables – so maybe a key to this aspect of Jesus’s teaching. Mark’s Gospel first uses the term ‘parable’ at 3:23, in an angry conversation: it seems that parables may not be comfortable or easy words.

This parable has two unusual features: a long explanation (4:13-20); and a cryptic little interlude (4:10-12), apparently about the purpose of parables. Together these suggest that not everyone who hears Jesus’ teaching will ‘get it’ and respond well.

General theories about the meaning of Jesus’ parables tend to cash out in ideas about this particular story. So, for example ...

Parables tell of **the coming of God’s reign**:

this is a parable of assurance  
beyond setbacks, there will be a great harvest.

Parables address **Jesus’ social context and desire for justice**:

this is about what the land should offer the people,  
as a gift of God, not diminished by rent, tithes and taxes.

Parables show Jesus as **climax of Israel’s story**:

this parable fulfils Isaiah 55:10-11 – God’s word bears fruit –  
which in turn told of Israel coming home to God after exile.

There has also been much discussion about whether the story is realistic. Did people sow as carelessly as this? Did ploughing precede sowing, or follow it? Is 30-60-100 a credible harvest, or are the numbers intentionally extravagant?

Now let’s look at the parable for ourselves:

**What strikes you** as the main point of the sower parable:

eventual success, patchy response, something else ... ?

Is it relevant that the sower is only mentioned at the start?

Obviously 4.11-12 is a puzzle. It seems to suggest that parables were intentionally opaque.

**What do you think** is the best way of making sense of this bit?

Here are some suggestions ...

(i) It explains **how it is with parables**: ‘some people hear but nothing sinks in ... people listen and don’t understand, for fear that if they did, they might have to turn’

(ii) It shows **the fulfilment of Isaiah** 6:9-10 (v.12). Jesus’ ministry will, like Isaiah’s, be stressful and unappreciated.

(iii) It’s **ironic, but meant to be persuasive**. Jesus challenges people to get beyond easy superficiality to insights that would ‘turn’ their lives into a new direction.

What is **the counterpoint** between 4.11-12 and 4.21-25?

Would this be picked up by the reader of the chapter?

How might 4.26-29 affect our reflection on the sower parable?

See over, for further thoughts about **the parable within Mark** ...