

Going

Across the Street, Around the World Series, November 25 & 26, 2023 | Matthew 13:31-33

Rob O'Neal, Senior Pastor

Why were people so eager to see the Kingdom of God?

The people of Israel and Judah had been oppressed by a succession of empires for centuries.

First, the Assyrians conquered the northern Kingdom of Israel in 721 BC. They later invaded Judah, but God intervened and delivered Judah from the Assyrians.

The Assyrians were replaced by the Babylonian Empire. The Babylonians defeated Judah and destroyed Jerusalem in 587 BC. Much of the population went into exile.

The Persian Empire replaced the Babylonians in 539 BC. The Persians allowed the exiles to return home and begin rebuilding Jerusalem and Judah.

Then after 336 BC when he came to the throne of Macedonia, Alexander the Great of Macedonia and the armies of a united Greece conquered the entire region.

After Alexander's death in 323 BC, the empire was divided up among his generals. The successors of two of his generals fought over Judah for the nearly two centuries. They both promoted Greek language and Greek culture.

Then from 64 BC forward into the New Testament, the Romans ruled Judah (now Judea).

The greatest level of autonomy they had came between the Greeks and Romans.

A king named Antiochus ordered Jews to abandon their religion and worship the pagan gods.

Antiochus sent messengers throughout Judah trying to force people to sacrifice pigs.

He had mothers killed with their children, just for being Jewish.

He had old men killed just for possessing the Torah.

They came to a village with a priest named Mattathias. Mattathias refused to sacrifice a pig on a pagan altar, but another person volunteered. Mattathias killed the king's officers and the man offering the pagan sacrifice.

This incited a rebellion led by Mattathias' son, Judas Maccabeus. "Maccabeus" means "the Hammer", so he was "Judas the Hammer." It was the Maccabean revolt.

The Temple in Jerusalem had been taken over, pagan altars had been set up, and the Temple had been desecrated by offering pigs (among other horrific acts). The rebels were eventually able to cleanse and rededicate the Temple in Jerusalem.

Can you imagine what it must have felt like for Jews to reclaim and rededicate the Temple?

The event is celebrated now through Hanukkah.

Judas' brother, Jonathan, was eventually appointed High Priest and ruled as priest and king.

It was the height of Jewish independence after the empires took control, and it was a sign of hope toward the future. The Jewish people wanted their land, they wanted freedom and a state, and they wanted a king like David, like Judas "the Hammer" Maccabeus.

It's no wonder people didn't understand Jesus.

Jesus said that the Kingdom of God had come near in him.

However, he didn't gather an army, start a rebellion, or kick out the Romans.

He didn't fit anybody's expectations.

However, Matthew 13:31-33 makes it clear that there was much more to come:

He put another parable before them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

He told them another parable. "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened."

These are the Parables of the Mustard Seed and of Leaven.

This is the third time we are looking at them.

Jesus is revealing the nature of the Kingdom of God.

As we look one more time at what Jesus says about the Kingdom of God in these parables, we find massive hope and a very big call on us.

The Kingdom of God displaces the kingdoms of this world.

In Ezekiel 31, God reminded the world that he had displaced the King of Assyria.

In Ezekiel 31, God spoke to a tyrant in a later day who threatened God's people.

God told that tyrant to look into the past, to one of the greatest kings ever, the King of Assyria.

The King of Assyria was leader of the first empire to walk over God's people.

In Ezekiel 31, God described the King of Assyria as being like a great tree, a cedar in Lebanon.

It's a truly massive, grand tree.

Because the King of Assyria was like such a massive tree, **Ezekiel 31:6** says:

***"All the birds of the heavens
made their nests in its boughs;
under its branches all the beasts of the field
gave birth to their young,
and under its shadow
lived all great nations. "***

What does that mean? It means that the Assyrian Empire was so large that it became a home for all kinds of people from all kinds of nations. Some came to Assyria for help and blessing. Most were just outright conquered and dominated.

When Assyria thought it was greater than God, though, God had the tree cut down.

When the Kingdom of Assyria tried to take God's place, he took them down.

In Daniel 4, God promised to displace Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylonia.

In Daniel 4, Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, had a dream. Again, he saw a vast tree. It to become so strong that its top reached heaven.

In **Daniel 4:12** Nebuchadnezzar says:

Its leaves were 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 heavens lived in its branches, and all flesh was fed from it.

Again, the nations of the world found a place to belong.

But again, this is a corrupted kingdom that conquers and dominated other nations. It defied God.

So, an angel came from heaven and ordered that the tree be chopped down.

Nebuchadnezzar's dream meant that he, too, would be humbled by God.

What is the message? The kingdoms of this world don't stand, even the worst of them.

God made this world; he is the rightful King, and this is his rightful Kingdom.

We have rebelled against him and set ourselves up as little kings with our own little kingdoms.

Collectively, you can think of everything against God as the kingdoms of this world.

Some of the kingdoms of this world are imposing for a time.

And there are powerful things that may seem fearsome in our day.

Some of them seem to come at us as a society.

Some of them seem to come at us individually.

But the Bible shows us that any powerful kingdom that sets itself up against God may be fearsome and destructive (lethal even) for a season, but it won't stand.

The kingdoms of this world bow to their true king, Jesus.

Jesus is the true King! As we have said before, the Bible shows us that one day, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, that he is in charge, that he is the true king. Even the kingdoms of this world will one day bow and acknowledge Jesus.

The Revelation shows us that even those who remain to stand against Jesus at the end will seem fearsome. They will look vast and powerful. They will make much noise. However, they will not be a challenge for Jesus. God who spoke creation into being will speak sin, death, evil, and the kingdoms of this world into judgment. It will be easy.

The Kingdom of God will be a home for people from every nation.

In Ezekiel 17, God tells us about a different kind of tree that will flourish.

In **Ezekiel 17:22-24** we read:

Thus says the Lord GOD: "I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and will set it out. I will break off from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one, and I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar. And under it will dwell every kind of bird; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest. And all the trees of the field shall know that I am the LORD ..."

God says that he is going to start something very small.

He will plant a cutting of cedar on a high mountain in Israel.
What God is planning will start in Israel, not anywhere else.
It will look vulnerable, but God will nurture it.
And there, in Israel, God will cause something massive to grow.
It will be the true Kingdom. God's Kingdom.
And it will be gigantic; it will provide shade and fruit.
And every kind of bird will find a welcome place in its branches.
All of this will show the trees of the field (the kingdoms of this world) that God is LORD.

Now we understand what Jesus was saying in the parable of the mustard seed.

In Jesus, God was planting a seed.
That seed would grow and become something big, something massive in scale.
It's the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God displaces the kingdoms of this world.
God's Kingdom will be a place where everyone is welcome, where all who will come belong.
That's why the mustard seed grows into a mighty bush where all the birds of the air dwell!
These birds come from everywhere, from far and wide, from across the skies!
That means that all the nations of the world will be welcome in the Kingdom of God.
People from every nation, tribe, and ethno-linguistic group on earth will be welcome and will be part of the Kingdom of God in the end.

That calls for urgent work around the world.

The Kingdom of God starts and grows by God's power.
But God sends us around the world as he reaches people from every nation, tribe, and tongue with the Good News about Jesus!
The Kingdom of God pushes us around the world on mission.
We are the mechanism God uses to fulfill these promises!
There are nations, tribes, and ethno-linguistic people groups that do not yet know Jesus.
We must go to them.

The Kingdom of God impacts the world fundamentally.

The Kingdom of God is like leaven that changes a whole loaf.

When you put natural leavening into dough, a process starts.
The bacteria and wild yeast in the leaven find new sugars that are new sources of food.
They begin consuming the new sugars, processing them, and release carbon dioxide that becomes bubbles inside the dough.
Pretty soon, the entire ball of dough is totally changed in every corner, from the inside out.

The Kingdom of God impacts the world down to the most basic level, even now.

The Kingdom of God is like leavening that has been added to the kingdoms of this world. The Kingdom of God is working away quietly.

This work is sometimes being done and these changes are happening under the surface, in ways that may be unseen right now. However, reactions are going on; the Holy Spirit is working; we are working; everything is changing!

Citizens of the kingdoms of this world are becoming citizens of the Kingdom of God.

Citizens of the Kingdom of God are working as ambassadors of King Jesus. We are representing the values and interests of King Jesus. We are advocating for the ways of King Jesus. We are building things that bring honor to and point to King Jesus. We are realigning the kingdoms of this world with the Kingdom of God.

We have to be realistic.

The kingdoms of this world are not going to surrender to King Jesus quickly, easily, or willingly. It's going to take work.

The kingdoms of this world are never going to become the Kingdom of God until Jesus returns. That's just a fact.

However, we still seek to do everything we can here and now to make the world as it is more and more into the world as it should be.

Let's be realistic, but let's also be true, obedient, and aspirational!

This is a call to impact the world for Christ even now.

Go out there into the world and make disciples of Jesus because every new disciple of Jesus is a new citizen of the Kingdom of God and a new ambassador for King Jesus.

Build a world that looks more and more like what King Jesus wants the world to look like.

That's why you go and raise Christian families.

That's why you go and do business in ethical and creative ways.

That's why you learn everything you can, to make yourself the most effective agent of God's Kingdom that you can be.

That's why you run for political office, that's why you do research, that's why you write books, that's why you build companies. That's why you do what you do! IMPACT the world for Christ.

Jesus said that the Kingdom of God is like leavening God is adding to a lump of dough.

God is placing us out there, in the kingdoms of this world.

God's Holy Spirit is working away under the surface, and he is placing us under the surface.

By his Holy Spirit we are working away, changing things silently and in unseen ways at first.

But these changes will continue and become truly significant when God is ready.

The leaven of the Kingdom of God will reshape and then overturn the kingdoms of this world.

We are the ones who carry that leaven into the kingdoms of this world.

Jesus was telling us to impact the world for him.

The Kingdom of God calls us to go around the world.

Steve and Carol Smith got that part right.

We got to celebrate Steve and Carol's retirement during World Outreach Weekend.

Thirty-eight years ago, they uprooted their family from Wintonbury Church here in Connecticut and went as missionaries to Ivory Coast, West Africa.

They took their family to share the Good News about Jesus.

Eventually, they realized how catalytic it might be to start a clinic and medical outreach.

Together with a team from the United States and with a doctor from Africa, they opened El Rapha Health Center in 2002.

Eventually, the other members of the team from the United States left.

The doctor from Africa who joined them sadly died.

Serving the Kingdom of God in the kingdoms of this world is not always easy!

However, Steve and Carol had built a team of people from Ivory Coast, people who had become followers of Jesus themselves. The Kingdom of God was working away under the surface, and the world was changing.

Last March, two decades after beginning, something happened that shows just how big the changes are that the leaven of the Kingdom of God is making in the kingdoms of this world.

This is Aka, the pharmacy manager. He is a committed Christian himself.

He led a devotional on Matthew 11 where Jesus offers rest to the weary.

Aka presented the Gospel and said that Jesus is the Savior of the world and asked if anyone wanted to receive Jesus.

A desperate Muslim couple came to Aka afterward. The husband shared that his wife had a long-term intestinal problem that had plagued her for years. She was unable to eat or sleep.

They had tried every medical option available to them. Nothing worked. They turned to traditional healers and witch doctors. That didn't work either.

They came to El Rapha because a neighbor said that the staff was kind and would pray with them before treating them. The couple asked Aka for help.

Aka asked them if they wanted to receive Jesus. Exhausted and desperate, they said "yes."

When Aka prayed with the woman, she began to vomit and was immediately relieved.

The next day, the husband called to say that his wife had eaten without pain for the first time in years and had been able to sleep restfully.

As time passed, she recovered completely.

God is doing miracles, saving souls, and working through people all around the world.

And he used Steve and Carol Smith to be leaven to get the process started.

The Kingdom of God calls us to go around the world to place leaven in the kingdoms of this world to see the process of dramatic transformation begin.

Will you pray in support of God's workers and Valley's partners around the world?

God is the one who is confronting the kingdoms of this world.

God is the one who is building the Kingdom of God.

He uses us in the process. He can use your prayers.

Will you pray for and with our partners around the world as they share the Good News?

Will you give to support God's workers and Valley's partners around the world?

Couples like Steve and Carol Smith can only stay on the field around the world when we send financial support to make it happen.

In other words, it takes giving here to make mission there happen.

We do that together by supporting the World Outreach Fund here at Valley.

Together, we support dozens of missionaries in places scattered across the globe.

They are sharing the Good News about Jesus with people who would not hear it otherwise.

Will you give to support our partners around the world?

Will you go for a short time to spread the Kingdom of God around the world?

We have multiple trips planned to places where there are opportunities to work with our partners to share the Good News about Jesus with people who do not otherwise have access to hear it.

You could go for a few days to a couple of weeks to spread the Gospel.

It may sound frightening or like a difficult thing to do.

But it is one of the most rewarding things you may ever do.

Will you go for a long time to spread the Kingdom of God around the world?

You don't have to go for just a week or two at a time to do some of the most important work in the world. You could go for years. Or decades.

God uses people just like Steve and Carol Smith, me, and you to introduce people around the world to Jesus Christ.

Can you hear God speaking to you today?

Don't ignore his voice. Say "yes" to him today.