

Small Packages

[Jesus said of God's kingdom,] "It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants" (Mark 4:31-32).

Scripture: Mark 4:21-32

Song: "Ordinary People"

At just 5' 3" tall, Muggsy Bogues is the shortest man to ever play in the NBA. After starring at Wake Forest University, he was selected in the first round of the 1987 NBA draft by the Washington Bullets. Over his 14-year career, Bogues played point guard for four different teams, averaging an impressive 7.6 assists per game. In a game of virtual giants, he stood tall.

The kingdom of God that Jesus ushered in is, by human standards, upside-down. In it, the first are last and the least are greatest. It's a kingdom in which small things can have a huge impact. Jesus said that the kingdom itself is like the tiny seed of the mustard plant that grows so big that birds can nest in it (Mark 4:31-32).

We may think that our input doesn't matter or that we don't have much to offer. Yet in God's kingdom, even the smallest act of faith is important. What small thing might you do today that God can use to have an impact in His kingdom?

Father, I believe that nothing is wasted when it's placed in Your hands. Even my smallest gift can bring glory to Your name. In Jesus' name, amen.

July 10–16. **Mark Williams** is a pastor, college professor, coach, and freelance writer who lives with his wife and children near York, Pennsylvania.

Is God Sleeping?

Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, “Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?” (Mark 4:38).

Scripture: Mark 4:33-41

Song: “Praise You in the Storm”

Some people can sleep through almost anything, anywhere. No amount of noise or commotion seems to bother them. These “heavy sleepers” can snore away with the lights on, the TV blaring, and the dogs barking at the mail carrier. Without a care in the world, seemingly nothing interrupts their slumber.

As the disciples fought an intense storm out on the lake—wind and waves raging all around them—Jesus seemed to be asleep without a care in the world. In desperation, His disciples woke Him. They interpreted Jesus’ slumber as a lack of concern for their safety, as Him not caring about their plight. Then with just a single rebuke, Jesus demonstrated His power over the storm, and all became calm. The disciples’ regard changed instantly from terror at the storm’s fury to awe at Jesus’ authority over the wind and waves.

When it seems God is silent, it’s easy to assume that He doesn’t care about our circumstances. This account from God’s Word reminds us that even when God isn’t doing what we think He should be doing this moment, He *is* aware of our situation, and He *does* care. He is present with us, and we can trust Him.

Father, sometimes I struggle to trust Your Word, especially in seasons when You seem silent. Please renew my faith in You today. Thank You for always being near and for hearing my cries for help. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Guard Your Heart

Today, if only you would hear His voice, “Do not harden your hearts” (Psalm 95:7-8).

Scripture: Psalm 95

Song: “Here’s My Heart”

Concrete is a unique substance. It pours wet and slushy and then, over a period of hours, hardens into virtual stone. When pouring a new foundation for a house (or a new driveway or patio), families might leave imprints of their hands or feet, or they may carve their initials into the wet concrete as a way of memorializing that time in their lives. This can only be done, though, when the concrete is still wet. Once it hardens, it cannot be changed back into its previously pliable state.

Our inner being works much like this. God creates our hearts to be soft and malleable in His hands. Over time, however, the realities of life in this fallen world can bring pain and disappointment. If we aren’t on guard, unhealthy ways of coping can harden our hearts and make them resistant to God’s voice of grace and mercy. In today’s passage, the psalmist is warning against this very thing.

God’s desire is for our hearts to stay open to His love throughout all the seasons of our life. It’s important that we guard against being hardened by anger, bitterness, or despair when we’re injured by the pain life brings. As we turn to God for healing and help, He can do what seems impossible: He can turn even a heart of stone into a heart of flesh again (Ezekiel 36:26).

Father, today help me to guard my heart and open it anew to Your love for me. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Making Much of Jesus

My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power (1 Corinthians 2:4-5).

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 2:1-8

Song: "His Name Is Wonderful"

Among professors, there are some who are more interested in conducting research in their chosen field than they are in teaching students in the classroom. When it's time for such educators to deliver a lecture, an assistant may need to pull them from their research lab. Then instead of presenting material at the students' level, these bright scholars might lecture in such a way that—while impressive—leaves students confused and frustrated.

Paul could have done a similar thing as he traveled from church to church, encouraging the people. Highly educated and trained in the Scriptures, Paul could have preached sermons that would have impressed and confounded even the sharpest scholars. Instead, Paul came in humility, preaching a simple message of Christ's love. "My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words," he wrote to the Corinthian church (1 Corinthians 2:4). Paul desperately wanted the people he reached to see Christ rather than be impressed by his preaching and ministry.

When we have the opportunity to share what God has done in our lives, no impressive or fancy words are necessary. We need only to make much of Jesus and His love!

Father, today help me bring glory and honor to Your name in all that I do. May I simply seek to make You known. In Jesus' name, amen.

Translation, Please!

The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:14).

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 2:9-16

Song: “Open the Eyes of My Heart”

Visiting a foreign country can prove to be challenging, especially when a person doesn't have a working knowledge of the language. A traveler who can't speak or read the language may end up staring blankly at menus, misunderstanding street signs, trying in vain to decipher train-station maps, and ultimately resorting to hand signals to get through the day. But bring along a translator (either virtual or human), and the whole trip takes a pleasant and positive turn. With the language barrier broken, things make sense and there can be meaningful interaction.

Walking through life without knowing the presence of Christ can leave a person unable to make sense of anything. Without the Holy Spirit's help, a person cannot “read the signs” and “follow the road-map” of God's will and purpose because, as the apostle Paul wrote, “they are discerned only through the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 2:14).

The presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives is something like a spiritual translator. Without Him interpreting God's truth to our understanding, we lack an accurate perception of it. But as we are taught by God's Spirit, our lives make sense and have true purpose and meaning.

Father, thank You for the presence of Your Spirit to guide me and bring meaning and purpose to my life. In Jesus' name, amen.

Strong like Oaks

They [the afflicted] will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor (Isaiah 61:3).

Scripture: Isaiah 61

Song: “Strength of My Life”

Across the bay from San Francisco stands a magnificent grove of coastal redwoods known as Muir Woods. These colossal trees from the bald cypress family are thought to range between 600 and 800 years old. They stand at well over 200 feet tall—the tallest at an impressive 258 feet. Some of them are so wide that two people can hug either side of the base and not come close to touching hands. Wordlessly they make known their strength and steadfastness.

In this beautiful verse from today’s passage, Isaiah the prophet wrote that the afflicted “will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor” (Isaiah 61:3). The message of this chapter is that those whose hearts are broken by mourning and grief will find their hope renewed in the Lord. This hope will give them the ability to stand like great oak trees, strong and tall in the midst of every storm and trial.

When you’re struggling, where do you turn for hope and help? During your most difficult times, if you look anywhere other than to the living God, you won’t have what you need to remain strong. You must look to God and His provision in every circumstance. He is your only hope and the only source of steadfast strength.

Father, today I’ll look to You, to Your Word, and to Your promises for my hope and strength. In Jesus’ name, amen.

The Perfect Combination

“The seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it” (Matthew 13:23).

Scripture: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Song: “Softly and Tenderly Jesus Is Calling”

When cooking, a person must use the right ingredients, combined the right way, cooked at the right temperature for the right amount of time. If one of these steps is done incorrectly or missed, dinner can end up being take-out instead of a delicious home-cooked meal.

In the parable of the sower, we learn about the right heart condition for the gospel message to be established in a person’s life. Jesus said that the good seed of the gospel message won’t remain if the heart’s disposition isn’t right or ready. A heart might be like soil that is hard-packed and resistant. Or it might be shallow and easily discouraged by hardship. Or perhaps it’s weedy with worldly pursuits and cares. But when the gospel is spoken at an opportune time to one whose heart has been prepared, that person hears and understands, and God’s Word takes root and grows up and is productive.

We can’t see inside people’s hearts. Only God can do that. Our job is to be prepared to share the truth of God’s Word at all times, “in season and out of season” (2 Timothy 4:2). By the grace and power of God, the timing of the message and the condition of the heart just may combine to be the most important moment in a person’s life.

Father, I’ll prepare my own heart right now to be ready to share the gospel message with anyone who will listen. In Jesus’ name, amen.