

THE COMING KINGDOM, PART VII

by Andy Woods

Because today's evangelical world equates the church with the messianic kingdom, we began a biblical study about the kingdom. This earthly kingdom is anticipated in the office of Theocratic Administrator lost in Eden, the biblical covenants, the predictions of the Old Testament prophets, and the Theocracy governing Israel from the time of Moses to Zedekiah. This arrangement terminated with the initiation of the "Times of the Gentiles," when the nation had no king reigning on David's Throne as Judah was trampled by various Gentile powers. Eventually Christ, the rightful Heir to David's Throne, appeared. Had first-century Israel enthroned Christ, the earthly kingdom would have materialized. Sadly, Israel rejected this kingdom offer (Matt. 12:24) leading to the kingdom's postponement. Consequently, Christ began to explain the spiritual conditions that would now prevail during the kingdom's absence. This interim program includes His revelation of the kingdom mysteries (Matt. 13) and the church (Matt. 16:18).

KINGDOM MYSTERIES

The first aspect of this interim phase is the kingdom mysteries (Matt. 13:1-52). These represent the course of events to be experienced by the kingdom's heirs or the "sons of the kingdom" (13:38) between Israel's rejection and future acceptance of the kingdom offer. Thus, these mysteries cover the time period between Israel's formal rejection of the kingdom and the Second Advent (13:40-42, 49-50). The kingdom mysteries represent new truths concerning the kingdom that were undisclosed in the Old Testament. Jesus made this point clear when He said, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted... But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear.

For truly I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see *it*, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear *it*" (Matt. 13:11, 16-17).

When the eight parables of Matthew 13 are understood harmoniously, they reveal a complete picture of this "mystery age." First, the parable of the **sower** teaches that the gospel will be preached throughout the course of the mystery age with varying responses based upon how the heart has been prepared. Responders to the truth will be given additional revelation (13:1-9, 18-23). Second, the parable of the **wheat and tares** teaches that it will be difficult to distinguish between the saved and unsaved within professing Christendom throughout the mystery age. The separation between believer and unbeliever will not be made until the Second Advent (13:24-30, 36-43). Third, the parable of the **mustard seed** teaches that Christendom will experience great numerical and geographical expansion from a small beginning (13:31-32). Fourth, because leaven in Scripture typically represents something pernicious or evil (Exod. 12; Lev. 2:11; 6:17; 10:12; Matt. 16:6, 12; Mark 8:15; Luke 12:1; 1 Cor. 5:6-8; Gal. 5:9), the parable of the **leaven** working its way through the meal teaches that professing Christendom will experience increasing moral and doctrinal corruption as the age progresses (Matt. 13:33). This parable predicts increasing apostasy throughout the present age. Unfortunately, "kingdom now" interpreters miss this crucial point by interpreting the leaven as something good rather than evil.

Walvoord explains:

What does the leaven represent? Postmillenarians and amillenarians...usually assume dogmatically that leaven cannot represent evil in the parable, although it is universally used to represent evil in both the Old and New Testaments...It is more evident than ever in the last third of the twentieth century that the gospel has not permeated the world and that evil tends to permeate the entire professing church, which is exactly what Matthew 13 teaches. In the Old Testament leaven is consistently used to represent evil...In the New Testament, leaven was used by Christ of the externalism of the Pharisees, of the unbelief of the

Sadducees, and of the worldliness of the Herodians, and in general of evil doctrine (Mt 16:6-12; Mk 8:14-21). In Paul's letters, likewise, leaven represents evil, as in 1 Corinthians 5:6-8 and Galatians 5:7-10. In the parable, the meal represents that which is good... The professing church, however, is permeated by evil doctrine, externalism, unbelief, and worldliness, which tends to inflate the church and make it larger in appearance, even as the leaven inflates the dough but actually adds nothing of real worth. The history of the church has all too accurately fulfilled this anticipation, and the professing church in the world, large and powerful though it may be, is permeated by the leaven of evil which will be judged in the oven of divine judgment at the end of the age... To some extent, evil will extend even to... the body of true believers in the church as well as those that come to Christ after the rapture... even true believers fall far short of perfection and can embrace to some extent worldliness, externalism, and bad doctrine.¹

Toussaint similarly notes:

The discussion revolves around the significance of the word "leaven" (*zyme*). Many contend that leaven is used here in a good sense and pictures the spread of the gospel throughout the earth. Others state that the word represents evil and is used to illustrate the growth of evil within the group which professes to inherit the kingdom. This latter interpretation has the stronger support. It is consistent with the doctrine of Scripture concerning the evil character of the end of the church age and the tribulation (1 Timothy 4; 2 Timothy 3; Jude; 2 Peter 3; Revelation 6–19). One of the greatest supports for the interpretation that leaven speaks of evil is the use of the word in Scripture. Invariably leaven pictures sin (Exodus 12; Leviticus 2:11; 6:17; 10:12; Matthew 16:12; Mark 8:15; Luke 12:1; 1 Corinthians 5:6-8; Galatians 5:9). Finally the verb used here, "to hide"... is very unusual if leaven represents good. It is a much more fitting word if leaven is to have a sinister effect. This is similar to the idea in the parable of the wheat and the darnel. The way the woman hides the leaven in the meal parallels very closely the manner in which the enemy sowed darnel by night. This parable reveals the fact that evil will run its course and dominate the new age. But it also indicates that when the program of evil has been fulfilled, the kingdom will come.²

Thus, the present age represents a period when the gospel is preached resulting in the salvation of some. However, a counterfeit sowing will also take place. Despite God's work throughout this age, Christendom will experience an increasing corruption. This teaching

¹ John F. Walvoord, *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come* (Chicago: Moody, 1974), 102-4.

² Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Kregel, 2005), 182.

concerning the increasing apostasy of the present mystery age can be found not only in the epistolary material (1 Tim. 4; 2 Tim. 3; 2 Pet. 3; Jude) but also in the Matthew 13 parables.

This teaching on the apostasy of the church does not mean that God cannot sovereignly send refreshing waves of revival and reformation, as He has done at various times. However, these refreshing seasons are not the norm but rather occur only intermittently throughout church history. A proper understanding of this apostasy represents a worldview that is diametrically opposed to “kingdom now” theology, which is the idea that the church will gradually Christianize the world thereby ushering in long-term cultural progress. The only way “kingdom-now” theology can be defended from Scripture is to ignore what the New Testament predicts concerning apostasy in the present mystery age.

Fifth, because Scripture refers to Israel as God's special treasure (Exod. 19:5), the parable of the **earthen treasure** teaches that Christ came to purchase Israel. However, Israel will remain in unbelief throughout the course of the mystery age and will not be converted until the age's conclusion (Matt. 13:44). Sixth, the parable of the **pearl of great price** refers to Christ's death that redeems members of the church throughout this age allowing the Lord to gain a treasure from among the Gentiles (13:45-46). Seventh, the parable of the **dragnet** teaches the coexistence of the righteous and the wicked throughout the age only to be separated by Christ at the age's conclusion (13:47-50). Eighth, the parable of the **householder** teaches that these kingdom mysteries must be considered alongside Old Testament kingdom truth if one is to understand the totality of God's kingdom agenda (13:51-52). In sum, when these eight parables are taken together, the Lord reveals the spiritual conditions that will prevail in the world during an interim period when the kingdom is not present.

MYSTERY FORM OF THE KINGDOM?

A mistake typically made even by dispensational interpreters is to contend that the Matthew 13 parables reveal a present spiritual form of the kingdom known as the mystery form of the kingdom. While not contending that the Davidic kingdom is present, they instead believe that the kingdom is spiritually present in mystery form only.³ However, even this perspective is to read far more into the text of Matthew 13 than what is actually there. Toussaint explains:

It is often alleged that the Lord predicted a form of the kingdom for the Church age in His parables, particularly those in Matthew 13. For many years dispensationalists have referred to these parables as teaching a mystery form or a new form of the kingdom...However, nowhere in Matthew 13 or anywhere does the Lord Jesus use the term mystery form. Rather, He refers to the “mysteries of the kingdom of heaven” (v. 11); that is, the Lord in these parables is giving to His disciples new truths about the kingdom that were hitherto unknown. It is strange that so many dispensationalists claim a new form of the kingdom is introduced in Matthew 13. Dispensationalists argue strenuously for a literal, earthly kingdom that is the fulfillment of the Old Testament when John, Jesus, and His disciples announce its nearness. Then suddenly these dispensationalists change the meaning in Matthew 13.⁴

(To Be Continued...)

³ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1990), 215-28.

⁴ Stanley D. Toussaint, "Israel and the Church of a Traditional Dispensationalist," in *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism*, ed. Herbert W. Bateman (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), 237.