

## THE PARABLES OF MATTHEW 13

The day the Jewish leaders accused Jesus of casting out demons in the power of Beelzebul, they crossed a line from which they could never retreat. At that point Jesus began teaching in cryptic stories that unbelieving Jews could not understand, nor could anyone without the revelation of the Spirit. It is in these stories, or parables, that the Lord predicts that believing Jews and believing Gentiles would receive His word and be fashioned into His *ekklesias*. This is why the thirteenth chapter of Matthew is so critical to our understanding. These parables could have applied to Israel when Jesus spoke them, or to Israel at the end of the age. It all depended on Israel's response. We know what happened. They murdered Jesus. Then over thirty years later, they rejected Him again, their resurrected and ascended Messiah.

What we can say for sure is that these parables have nothing to do with the body of Christ because they concern the kingdom of heaven – the earthly reign of the King. Only Israel has part in this kingdom, not believers in the body of Christ. Jesus didn't come to Earth to teach the body of Christ; He came to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. It was to them that Yahweh had promised the earthly kingdom. It was this earthly, Messianic, one-thousand-year kingdom that Jesus used to preface His seven parables in Matthew. These parables were spoken exclusively to the Jewish people at the time, not to the body of Christ which had not yet come.

These parables can only apply in two places. They are prophesies concerning the remnant congregations of Jews and proselytized Gentiles during the Acts period; or they deal with remnant assemblies during Israel's final seven years known as the tribulation. John named the assemblies that existed during his time. Of course, we don't know what their names will be during the tribulation that is to come.

Because of the intransigence of the nation, the promise of the kingdom was suspended, and earthly governance was transferred to the Gentile nations temporarily. It has rested with them for nearly two thousand years, but a change is coming now that Israel is back in the promised land as a legitimate jurisdiction. The context then is not first century Israel, but end-of-the-age Israel while she endures the tribulation of seven years in preparation for her coming Bridegroom. We Christians must not take from Israel what belongs to her. It is she who awaits the arrival of her King and His kingdom, not us. If we are careful to place these parables in this space and in this context, they will make sense.

The objection is raised that all these parables explain the kingdom of the heavens in a positive way, but that is not the case. John the Baptizer and Jesus came pronouncing the kingdom of heaven to the Jews of Israel, intending that the nation would repent, be born from above, and embrace it. When they did not and accused Jesus of doing His work in the power of Beelzebul, Jesus suddenly shifted His teaching from direct words to parables. The parables hide the truth, especially the truth about the kingdom. From the time Jesus began to speak in parables, the kingdom became mysterious, hidden away and only found by the diligent seeker. That is why in the letters to the seven *ekklesias* in Asia (Revelation 2 and 3), there is the call to the overcomers, those who would seek the hidden

mystery of the kingdom and secure its treasure. The Revelation is strictly a description of Israel's final seven years, known at the Tribulation, or Great Tribulation, in which Israel, the bride of the Lamb, makes herself ready for her King's return to Earth. Only those in Israel who seek Him, and the reality of His kingdom will find the treasure. Jesus speaks His seven parables to them, not to the nation in general. They are the remnant in Israel who seek the reality of the kingdom that Jesus hid away in His parables in Matthew 13.

## **THE SOWER**

Jesus speaks seven (the complete number of spiritual perfection) parables, each predictive of that period during the book of Acts, but because of Israel's rejection, they predict the final seven years of Israel's history. The first (Matt. 13:3-9, 18-23) is the parable of the sower who broadcasted seed into four places – the wayside, the stony places, the thorny places, and the good ground. Only a remnant responds, being the good ground which bears fruit.

This parable may correspond to the assembly in Ephesus, a group of faithful saints who will maintain their relationship with their Lord regardless the cost to them. These are the remnant that would someday be counted among the "called and chosen and faithful." Though many in this time allow themselves to be led astray into apostasy, these separate themselves and willingly take on the brand of heretic or fanatic. They choose rather to live in the simplicity of the Spirit, removed from the temptations of the world, and ever watch for the resurrection of the righteous or the return of the King.

## **PARABLE OF THE TARES**

Smyrna in Revelation 2, an *ekklesia* in Asia during the first century, matches precisely the parable of the tares in Matthew 13. It suffers severe persecution and struggles with tares growing up to confuse and to obfuscate the truth. Gnosticism runs rampant, bringing in cryptic doctrines and mysteries from the East to dilute the truth of Jesus. It becomes a repository of Jewish, Christian, and Eastern beliefs in an amalgam of intellectualism in direct conflict with the truth of the Scriptures, all shrouded in the alluring bait of "mysteries" and secret societies of "the knowing ones," the contemporary face of ancient Babylon with Nimrod. It is feasible to see this happening in Israel at the end of the age. There is reason to believe that this *ekklesia* is an actual congregation during the time of the seven years. We can see it will be a terrible period for them, being under severe torment for their faith. It is truly a crucible of confusion and pain.

## **THE MUSTARD SEED**

During the Acts period Jesus' third parable (Matt. 13:31-32) – the mustard seed – develops. He relates how a farmer took a mustard seed and plants it in his field, but instead of producing an herb good for seasoning, the seed grows into a monstrous tree

that provides shelter for the birds of the air. Anyone reading this parable with an open mind must conclude that something is horribly wrong here. The Creator's laws of creation – "after his kind" – are violated. Herbs do not grow into trees. Birds do not nest in herbs. But the birds, which in the first parable swoop down to devour the good seed, here they find homes in the branches of this tree. What do we make of this?

The sowing of grain (first two parables) and the mustard seed are Christ's Word, and with it the Law of Life contained in it. This Word is sown by the faithful, but because of the enemy's efforts, not only do good plants grow out of their sowing, but also the weak recipients forsake the principles of the law of life contained in His Word. By abandoning the truth of Christ, these compromised believers of the *ekklesias* (in this case Pergamos) violate the parameters of the living Word and become something never intended. These saints, depicted by the mustard plant becomes a mutant tree full of the birds of the air that represent the unseen evil powers in the atmosphere. This is sad given the dire situation of the first century. But remember, even the worst congregations had their faithful overcomers who stand resolute.

The Lord predicted with this tiny parable of the mustard seed/tree that the "mystery of iniquity" (2 Thess. 2:7) would slither itself into the corporate soul of the remnant community and expand and metastasize. He also predicted in Matt. 24:37 that "as the days of Noah were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be." Noah's day was remarkable for its violence and illegal union with the fallen angels. So will the tribulation in Israel be at the end of the age when "men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, heady, high minded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away" (2 Tim. 3:2-5).

## LEAVEN

It is easy to see the reality of Jesus' words in Matt. 13:33 when He says this:

***"The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened."***

It is without dispute that leaven in Scripture refers to sin and corruption. It is always a negative and evil term, and it was forbidden to be in any offering to the Lord (except one of the two loaves at Pentecost), and the Israelites were to put it out of their houses at Passover. When the woman places it in the fine flour, her intention is to corrupt the whole loaf of Christian testimony. This describes a pitiful congregation – Thyatira – but even this desperately evil community has its overcomers who are part of the victorious remnant in the first century.

Jesus equated leaven to the teachings of the Pharisees and Saducees and Herodians, the religious conservatives, liberals and earthly secularists of that day. The fine meal is the

fruit of the wheat sown in the first parable, good for the nourishment of the people. This is the true teaching - the Bread of Life - communicated to the children of the kingdom. The Woman in this parable is the scriptural metaphor for an organized system apart from Yahweh, either religious or secular. She, through her agents the tares, mixed into the truth of Christ and His teachings the vile doctrines of legalism and liberalism and secularism, either to make the true teachings rigid and dead, or diluted and eviscerated, or exclusively earthly and not heavenly. It is difficult to believe that Israel could go this direction amidst the intense situation surrounding them, particularly a congregation of supposed believers during the tribulation. But the fact that there are overcomers among them, proves it must be so.

### **THE HIDDEN TREASURE**

Jesus' fifth parable in Matthew 13:44 relates to this perilous period depicted in the book of Acts. The Word of God is living and operative, and it will not be kept down, not by unbelieving Jews; not by the heathen. By the Lord's sovereignty and by His perfect timing, His Word is released into the turbulent situation among the *ekklesias*, and in that Word the treasure chest of priceless treasures is hidden. To my thinking the field in the parable is the Bible containing the riches of Christ. The man, representing the children of the kingdom, is in the field and discovers the buried treasure (the good seed of the Word of God) and gives everything he owns to buy the field. In other words, he devotes his life to the truth, and in that devotion, he finds Christ hidden in it. Luther found justification by faith; Calvin found eternal security; Arminius found Christian responsibility, etc. These brothers sold out to seize the truth and to reveal it to the common people. This is what the letter to Sardis addresses. This is the kind of activity that pleases the Lord, especially under such dire circumstances as the tribulation. This is what overcoming looks like.

### **THE PEARL**

In Matthew 13:45-46 Jesus spoke another tiny parable with enormous import in the history of the Christian assemblies in the Acts period.

***“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man, seeking goodly pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had, and bought it.”***

If we read the description of the assembly at Philadelphia, this parable is a match. Nothing negative is spoken about this congregation. They are serious, and they know their situation is uncertain and frightening. I have no doubt there will be a “Philadelphia” in Israel during the tribulation when the parables will be fulfilled. Overcomers will emerge.

The expensive pearl continues the theme of the other parables and represents the Word of God, the word of truth, except in this parable it is hidden under the restless waters of death inside an oyster. The merchant knows what he is seeking because he is an expert, a purveyor of pearls, a shrewd man of instinct and knowledge. He represents a believer who is seeking the truth by asking in prayer and knocking in faith at the door of the One who is truth itself. The perpetually changing philosophies of secular thinkers, the many different creeds and sects and confessions of Christians, and the cauldron of social unrest, conflated, and buried the Word of Truth under waves of death, inundated by the very floods that will someday disgorge the last great enemy of Christ – the Beast – in a false resurrection from the abyss. Though the world sees nothing but turmoil and confusion all about them, there are divers busy bringing value to the surface, value scrutinized by the merchants - seeking ones who will never be satisfied with human conventions, who will reject the enticements of the world, and who will, to obtain the prize, surrender all they have to get it. They are the experts, the dealers in truth, the seekers of reality. They know value when they see it, and they know there is no value in the world and its systems of error.

### **THE DRAGNET**

Jesus ends the seven parables with Matt. 13:47-50, a story about the fish net gathering all kinds of fish for sorting at the end of the age. What began in the beginning with Satan planting tares among the wheat ends here with the final separation of the wheat and the tares. We've seen the great damage these false Christians have dealt to the true saints, but now it is time for the reckoning, the dread time of judgment. The sea here is the home for the fishes, like the field is home to the wheat and tares.

The net "was cast into the sea." The first casters of the net were the apostles when the Lord told them to go forth and disciple all nations. They dragged the net first in Jerusalem, then in Judea and Samaria, and finally, with Paul, to all the nations. That net is still in the sea (world) snagging fish (humanity) until the number is complete that the net was designed to hold. This shows the sovereignty of God in that He knows just how many "good" fish will respond to the gospel message during the tribulation period. The angels sort the fish and put the good into vessels, which correspond to the barn in the second parable (13:30); but the bad are cast away into the abyss, the furnace of fire. This is what awaits every believer and every unbeliever.

These seven parables trace the mysterious kingdom of heaven as it applies to the *ekklesias* of the first century prior to the King coming to establish His kingdom. Because the nation of Israel rejected the offer of the kingdom during the Lord's ministry, the kingdom became hidden from all those who would not see or seek it. It became mysterious, and that is why the Lord described it in simple stories full of meaning to those who would understand. The Lord sowed the good seed, but, because of the compromised soil of the human heart, most of the seed was unfruitful. Where it did find good soil and take root, the enemy came in and sowed his own seed, his children of wickedness among the children of the kingdom, thereby causing dramatic and debilitating confusion. We can see this in the book of Acts and in the letters of the apostles written

then. Because of the influence of these wicked ones, Christian leadership violated their Christian virtues and misled the saints. This allowed the birds – the devourers of the Word of truth – to nest in the “branches” of the *ekklesias*. Some believers refused the order of things and began to diligently search for the pure truth found in the Word, and once they found it, they devoted all they were and had to study it, proclaim it, and dispense it. These were the overcomers.

What about the others? The book of Acts ends with a horrible event. The national leaders of Israel rejected the gracious offer of the Messiah and His kingdom, forcing Paul to deliver Yahweh’s judgment from the book of Isaiah:

***And He said, “Go, and tell this people: ‘Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’ “Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and return and be healed” (6:9-10).***

The nation treated the offer the same way they had treated Yahweh’s Lamb. Yahweh laid His chosen nation aside and left the door open to the Gentiles. The remnant congregations knew they had no kingdom to look forward to, probably and likely came over to Paul’s teachings and practice of the body of Christ.

What shall we do with the seven parables? Surely, they were prophetic for the *ekklesias* in the Acts period, but is that it? Is that where it stops? I don’t think so. Israel doesn’t stop here, so neither should the parables.

Israel’s suspension from the Lord’s purpose for them has now lasted 1950 years, but Israel shall rise again. When Israel’s final seven years begins, so shall the seven parables finally be fulfilled.