

Purging Out the Leaven

“Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened.” —I Corinthians 5:7 **IN THE DAYS AND WEEKS** leading up to this year’s Memorial celebration, which will be after sundown on April 5, it should be especially helpful that we take to heart the important lessons concerning the subject of leaven. The Bible’s first references to leaven are in connection with the Lord’s instructions concerning the original Passover supper, which was eaten by the Israelites the night before they were delivered from their bondage in Egypt. Unleavened bread was to be used at the Passover supper. At this time, God also gave instructions concerning a seven-day feast to immediately follow the Passover supper. “Seven days shall ye eat unleavened bread; even the first day ye shall put away leaven out of your houses: for whosoever eateth leavened bread from the first day until the seventh day, that soul shall be cut off from Israel.”—Exod. 12:15

The use of leaven was specifically prohibited by God in connection with nearly all the sacrifices

which the Israelites offered to him. Literally speaking, leaven is actually yeast. Although yeast adds much flavor to bread and other foods when properly used and preserved, it also ferments easily. When fermented, it soon spoils any food in which it is mixed or even comes within close contact. We gather from this natural characteristic that God uses leaven in the Bible as an illustration of sin in all its various corrupting aspects. This thought is borne out by Jesus. "Then Jesus said unto them [the disciples], Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees. And they reasoned among themselves, saying, It is because we have taken no bread. Which when Jesus perceived, he said unto them, O ye of little faith, why reason ye among yourselves, because ye have brought no bread? Do ye not yet understand, neither remember the five loaves of the five thousand, and how many baskets ye took up? Neither the seven loaves of the four thousand, and how many baskets ye took up? How is it that ye do not understand that I spake it not to you concerning bread, that ye should beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees? Then understood they how that he bade them not beware of the leaven of bread, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees."—Matt. 16:6-12

LEAVEN OF FALSE DOCTRINE

From this quotation, it is evident that Jesus used leaven as a symbol of the false doctrines, or teachings, of the Pharisees and Sadducees. The Scriptures do not indicate in detail a great deal concerning these false doctrines. However, we do

know that the Sadducees taught that there is no resurrection of the dead, and this teaching alone corrupts and destroys one of the main doctrines of Christ.

Jesus said, “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell [Gehenna] than yourselves.” (chap. 23:15) How this emphasizes the corrupting influence of false doctrines! Surely it makes clear to us the importance of being sure that the doctrines which we believe and teach are fully in harmony with the Word of God.

The scribes and Pharisees, without doubt, held to some of the truths set forth by the Law and the prophets, but they had gone beyond these inspired sources of truth. They had accepted and allowed themselves to be influenced by the teachings of tradition, most of which had no basis in the Law originally given by God to the Israelites through Moses. It was these teachings which had corrupted them in belief and in practice to the extent that their efforts to serve the Lord were not acceptable to him.

LEAVEN IN PRACTICE ALSO

Not only had the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees leavened, or corrupted, the teachings of God’s words by their traditions, but they had also, symbolically speaking, permitted leaven to enter into their hearts and to influence their course of action with respect to their service to God. Although technically they still “sat in Moses’ seat,” Jesus advised his followers not to follow their example, their way of life.

Jesus said, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not. For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. But all their works they do for to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments, And love the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues, And greetings in the markets, and to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi."—Matt. 23:2-7

In verse 13 of this chapter, Jesus continues his denunciation of the corrupt practices of these religious leaders of Israel. We quote again: "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye devour widows' houses, and for a pretence make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation [condemnation]."—vss. 13,14

Jesus continues to denounce these "blind guides" for their hypocritical ways, but we have quoted sufficient to establish the point that in character, as well as in doctrine, they were corrupted by symbolic leaven. In Mark 8:15, Jesus speaks of "the leaven of Herod." Herod was not a teacher in Israel, but a ruler representing Rome. His "leaven" was in the fact that he tried to please Rome and at the same time curry favor with the influential among Israel. This double-minded condition of hypocrisy

was illustrated by Jesus as leaven which had entered and was influencing him.

We need not conclude that all of Israel's religious leaders had been corrupted by symbolic leaven. There was Nicodemus, for example, who went to the Lord in sincerity to learn more of the truth concerning this man whom his associates so generally opposed. There was also Joseph of Arimathaea, who actually, at last, became a full believer in Jesus as the Messiah. There were probably others, too, who were sincerely striving to follow the Law as originally given.

Certainly, among the people who were not leaders in Israel, were those who served the Lord with sincerity of heart and purpose. Jesus identifies one of these. When speaking of Nathanael, he said, "Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!" (John 1:47) Here was a man pure of heart. He was straightforward, having no guile, no "leaven" of the Pharisees. There were others in Israel who likewise were without guile, who became followers of Jesus.

LEAVEN CORRUPTS THE CHURCH

Later, in the church at Corinth, there was an individual who was not deporting himself in harmony with the principles of righteousness. The Apostle Paul instructed the brethren "to deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." To this, Paul added, "Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?"—I Cor. 5:5,6

Here, the unfaithful brother in the church is symbolically likened to leaven who, if allowed to

remain in the assembly, could lead to the corruption of the entire congregation. A similar use of leaven as an illustration of a corrupting influence is found in Galatians 5:9. In the context, Paul refers to one or more who had come in among the brethren with teachings contrary to the Truth, specifically, that they should be circumcised. Some apparently had been influenced by this false teaching and had ceased for a time to “obey the truth.” (vs. 7) Paul emphasizes that this false teaching they had accepted did not come from the Lord, and then adds, “A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump.” How careful we must be to ensure that a leavening influence is not permitted to corrupt the church of God, the ecclesia arrangement.

PARABLE CONCERNING LEAVEN

Jesus gave a parable concerning leaven, stating, “The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened.” (Matt. 13:33) This parable furnishes another interesting study regarding the symbolism of leaven. To understand this lesson, however, it is essential to know what Jesus means in this parable by the expression “kingdom of heaven.”

This expression is sometimes used in the New Testament with respect to the preparatory aspects of that kingdom rather than to the kingdom established in power and great glory. Paul wrote that the Heavenly Father “hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son.” (Col. 1:13) Here the Lord’s consecrated people are said to have already been

translated into the kingdom. This obviously is the kingdom in preparation. This work of preparation has proceeded throughout the Gospel Age, and it will continue until the harvest work is completed at the end of the age.

Jesus said, "From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force." (Matt. 11:12) Here the Lord's people, called to follow in the footsteps of Jesus and to live and reign with him in his kingdom, are spoken of as "the kingdom of heaven." The "violence" alluded to, and the taking of the kingdom by force, are a reference to the persecution of the kingdom class, beginning with Jesus, and continuing throughout the Gospel Age. After the kingdom class is completed and established in authority and power, they, with Jesus their head, will rule the nations with a rod of iron, and as the vessels of a potter shall those nations be broken to pieces.—Ps. 2:9; Rev. 2:27

In another parable, Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field: but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat." (Matt. 13:24,25) Jesus explained later that the good seed are "the children of the kingdom" and the tares are "the children of the wicked one." (vs. 38) Here the kingdom class, described again as "the kingdom of heaven," is shown to have had evil introduced into its midst. The parable shows, in other words, that during the development of those who will live and reign with Christ in his kingdom, they become subjected to efforts by Satan to divert them from their goal of joint-heirship with Christ.

LEAVEN PUT INTO THREE MEASURES OF MEAL

In the short parable concerning the leaven put into three measures of meal until the whole was leavened, we are presented with another aspect concerning the development of the kingdom. Here again, as universally throughout the Scriptures, leaven is used as a symbol of corrupting influence. In this case, the corruption takes place in the spiritual food—the doctrines—which were originally supplied by the Lord for the nourishment of his people as New Creatures in Christ Jesus.

Jesus said, quoting Moses, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God.” (Luke 4:4) The words of God recorded in the Bible for us set forth his plan of salvation for both the church and the world. They also include an expression of his will for the guidance of his people, especially those of the Gospel Age who are following in the footsteps of Jesus and who have been made partakers of the heavenly calling. This is their food, or “meal,” which was given to the apostles by Jesus, and through them to the entire company of saints that they might be nourished as New Creatures. By this nourishment, they are to be made ready for their glorification with Jesus in his kingdom of power and glory, through which all the families of the earth will be blessed.

However, it was not long after the apostles fell asleep in death that error—symbolic leaven—began to be injected into this pure food which the Lord furnished. It was almost imperceptible to start with, but this leavening continued to such an extent that the whole body of truth from the Lord became corrupted. Largely responsible for this was

the great deceiver, Satan. To accomplish this corruption he used human instrumentalities and, finally, a counterfeit church system, which Jesus identifies in the parable as a “woman,” to complete the corrupting work.

This “woman” is identified in the Book of Revelation as “Babylon.” “He carried me away in the spirit into the wilderness: and I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet coloured beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns. And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication.” (Rev. 17:3,4) This is the false church system which, throughout the Dark Ages, was united with many of the earthly civil powers.

DOCTRINES CORRUPTED BY LEAVEN

In the parable, Jesus speaks of three measures of meal being corrupted. One of these might well represent the teachings of the Bible with respect to the condition of the dead and the penalty for sin. God told Adam that if he partook of the forbidden fruit he would die. (Gen. 2:17) The Apostle Paul wrote, “The wages of sin is death.”—Rom. 6:23

This simple truth was corrupted by the “leaven” put into the “meal.” The erroneous theory of the immortality of the soul developed, which stated that when a man dies his soul remains alive and that, actually, there is no such thing as death. Out of this error came other false teachings, including eternal torment as “the wages of sin” instead of death. If, according to this corrupting theory, no

one really dies because they have an immortal soul, then there can be no resurrection of the dead. Thus the hope of the resurrection also became corrupted. How plain, though, is the simple statement of the Bible concerning the soul—"The soul that sinneth, it shall die."—Ezek. 18:4

Even more fundamental was the manner in which this particular false theory corrupted the doctrine of the ransom as set forth in the Word of God. According to the Scriptures, Christ died for the sins of the people, being a substitute in death for father Adam and, through him, for the entire race. If there is no death, however, this beautiful doctrine of redemption through Christ Jesus is corrupted and destroyed.

Another of the corrupted "measures" of meal might well be the teachings of the Bible with respect to God's Messianic kingdom arrangement for the blessing of all the families of the earth. According to the Scriptures, this kingdom in power and great glory is to be set up following the Second Advent of Jesus, with Jesus as its Head and those who have suffered and died with him as associate rulers.

This simple truth also became corrupted. Instead of waiting for this development in the plan of God, people were taught that the union of church and state was in reality the kingdom of Christ on earth and that there was no future kingdom to look forward to. This cast a shadow over the promises of God with respect to the blessings of the people through the agencies of the kingdom. Additionally, if the church were reigning with Christ in this life, the promises of future glory with him in the kingdom would be made meaningless.

MAN'S ETERNAL HOME

Perhaps the third measure of meal corrupted by leaven was the teaching of the Bible with respect to God's provision of the earth to be man's eternal home. The teaching developed that when people "die" they are merely transformed to another place of abode, for, according to the corrupted teachings previously noted, there is no death. As these corrupting influences continued, the false theory emerged that one day the earth would be destroyed and man would no longer enjoy it as his home.

The glorious truth, as set forth by God in his Word, is that "the earth abideth for ever" (Eccles. 1:4) and he created the earth "not in vain, he formed it to be inhabited." (Isa. 45:18) The hope of the restoration of man to live on the earth forever, described in the Scriptures as "restitution" (Acts 3:21), was completely corrupted by the false teaching that the earth would be destroyed. The ultimate purpose of our Lord's return was thus made void, and millions of the professed followers of Jesus were left in darkness so far as the real plan of redemption was concerned.

Thankfully, there was always the one here and one there whom the Lord specially protected against this leaven while the masses of professed Christians were led almost completely away from the real teachings of the Bible. In this end of the age, however, the Lord has furnished his faithful people with meat in due season. In this we rejoice, for this meat has brought back to the forefront the simple and unleavened doctrines of the Bible.

“YE ARE UNLEAVENED”

Turning to our theme text in I Corinthians 5, we find Paul admonishing us to “purge out” any leaven in our lives, “as ye are unleavened.” (vs. 7) Elaborating further, he says, “Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.”—vs. 8

Notice the expression, “leaven of malice and wickedness.” This is a true explanation of what is represented in the Scriptures by leaven—“malice and wickedness.” Nothing good or noble or praiseworthy is ever symbolized by leaven, but, as we have seen, it does represent false doctrine and hypocrisy. From Paul’s words here, we realize that leaven additionally represents any fallen trait of character in our life. These have a corrupting influence on our heart, mind, words, and actions, and we must rid ourselves of this leaven to the greatest extent possible. As noted earlier, the Israelites were instructed to “put away leaven out of your houses” during the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread. We too must put away the leavening influences of sin as we daily feast from the Lord’s table.

The phrase “purge out” in our theme text literally means in the Greek text to cleanse thoroughly. The “old leaven” is a similar phrase to that which Paul speaks of in other places as the “old man.” One such reference is found in these words: “Put off concerning the former conversation [conduct] the old man, which is corrupt.” (Eph. 4:22) Notice that Paul says the old man is “corrupt,” just as is the “old leaven.” He continues, “And be renewed in the spirit of your mind; And that ye put on the new

man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.” (vss. 23,24) The “new man” is the “new creature” (II Cor. 5:17), which is begotten by God’s Holy Spirit. It is not contaminated with the “old leaven,” but is a new work which God has begun in his consecrated children. It is Christ’s character which is the “new creature,” the “new man.” Through its development by the guiding influence of God’s Holy Spirit, the “new man” is able to conquer the “old man” and make us acceptable servants of God. Translating this thought to our daily lives, the purging or cleansing of the “old leaven” is to be done primarily by the shifting of our wills, efforts, thoughts, and actions to the service of God. Thus we become an unleavened “new lump,” usable to God.

In Galatians, chapter 5, Apostle Paul contrasts the fruits of the old man with those of the new. He enumerates many of the “works of the flesh” which have a corrupting effect on us if allowed to be a part of our character. He states that those who “do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.” (vss. 19-21) In their place, Paul says, are to be developed the fruits of the Spirit. He identifies these as “love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance,” and then adds, “against such there is no law.” (vss. 22,23) There is no law against these because they are “unleavened.” They emanate from the “new man” and are in full harmony with God’s perfect law.

In this study, we have seen that leaven is symbolic of that which corrupts. There is the leaven of false doctrine, the leaven of hypocrisy, the leaven of malice and wickedness, and the leaven of the sinful

flesh in its various manifestations. As we prepare our hearts during this Memorial season, let us remember the lessons concerning leaven. Let us also remember that these are lessons which all the consecrated should take to heart and apply every day of the year. Remembering that we “are unleavened,” we should always be on the alert lest leaven in any form should find its way into our hearts and lives to corrupt our hope and destroy our faith. May it be the determination of all of the Lord’s consecrated people to be daily faithful to our Heavenly Father.

“Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened.”—I
Corinthians 5:7

