

The Kingdom of Heaven in Preparation

*“These things
spake Jesus . . . in
parables; . . . That
it might be fulfilled
which was spoken
by the prophet,
saying, I will open
my mouth in
parables; I will
utter things which
have been kept
secret from the
foundation of the
world.”*

—Matt. 13:34,35

IN THE FIRST TWO LES-

sons of this article series on the Parables of Jesus, we considered “The Parable of the Sower” and “The Wheat and the Tares.” In those lessons, we noted extensive detail given by Jesus as he spoke to the multitudes assembled on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Additionally, the Master provided the interpretation of these parables to those gathered there so that they might be stirred

to give further thought to his words.

By way of contrast to the foregoing, in this lesson we will consider five short parables, in which very little detail is provided. Only ten verses comprise all five of these parables. Our understanding of

their meaning is also limited to some extent due to the fact that, in the case of the first four, Jesus did not provide any explanation. In the fifth parable, however, he does give a brief description of its meaning. The one common theme we observe is found in the phrase, “The kingdom of heaven is like . . . ,” which appears in the opening words of all five parables. It is this theme that we will look to in order to assess the meaning of Jesus’ words.

PARABLE OF THE MUSTARD SEED

The account of the first of the five parables we will herein consider reads as follows: “Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field: Which indeed is the least of all seeds: but when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof.”—Matt. 13:31,32

Because Jesus did not explain the parable of the mustard seed, in order to understand its lesson we must compare it with certain facts which the Scriptures reveal to us concerning “the kingdom of heaven.” One of these is that many of the Bible’s references to the kingdom pertain, not to the time when Christ is ruling “from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth,” but to the time when those who will constitute the rulers in the kingdom are being selected from the world of mankind and being proven worthy of the high position to which they are called.—Ps. 72:8

The Bible indicates that during this preparatory aspect of the kingdom the Lord’s true people, “the

children of the kingdom,” would be a very small company. (Matt. 13:38) On another occasion, Jesus addressed these saying, “Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” (Luke 12:32) The Scriptures also reveal that this “little flock” of disciples would be unrecognized by the world, and persecuted.—I John 3:1; Matt. 5:10-12

The parable of the mustard seed, on the other hand, suggests a large growth of the kingdom, from a very small beginning. It is likened to a literal mustard seed, which is very tiny, but grows to be a giant herb, or tree, in which the “birds of the air” could find shelter. It is true that when the kingdom of Christ is established in power and great glory, its rulership will be extended throughout all the earth. However, the mustard seed parable hardly fits this situation, so we must seek its explanation along other lines.

We believe the clue is suggested by Jesus in his earlier parable of the wheat and the tares. As we saw in that study, Jesus indicated that the “tares” represented “things that offend, and them which do iniquity,” and that at the end of the age these were to be gathered “out of his kingdom.” (Matt. 13:41) The point is that during the preparatory period of the Gospel Age, prior to the work of the kingdom in power and glory, there have been iniquitous—sinful elements. This, we believe, suggests the proper explanation of the mustard seed parable.

Throughout the present age there has been a counterfeit kingdom class, as well as the true. Indeed, from a very small beginning of evil shortly

after the apostles fell asleep in death, there grew what the world called “Christendom,” or Christ’s kingdom. It embraced all the nations of Europe, and its influence spread to other countries. In the branches of this “tree” all classes of the world and the worldly found shelter. It became their abiding place, their home. (Luke 13:19) John the Revelator, when referring to this system as “Babylon the great,” used the same metaphor as the parable, and spoke of it as the dwelling place of “every unclean and hateful bird.”—Rev. 18:2

So well established and popular became this “tree” that it was an advantage from the standpoint of prestige and social standing to seek shelter in its branches. People were not invited to join its ranks on the grounds that it would offer them an opportunity to suffer and to die with Christ. Instead of persecution, suffering, and sacrifice, they were offered popularity. Instead of being a “little flock,” this kingdom class counted its members by the millions. Indeed, Christendom grew into a very imposing “tree.” The parable refers to it as the “greatest among herbs,” so the comparison is not between the sizes of trees in a forest, but between herbs in a garden. In this sense, the mustard tree’s size would dwarf that of all other herbs. Certainly the leaders of Christendom have long boasted of the great growth of that which they have planted.

PARABLE OF THE LEAVEN

The second lesson for our consideration is the parable of the leaven. Jesus stated: “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) The particular wording of this verse, as well as the fact that it immediately follows the mustard seed parable, suggests that it has a similar meaning, and also applies to the false kingdom of Christ rather than to the true.

This conclusion is reached from the fact that “leaven” is always used in the Bible as a symbol of sin—of that which is out of harmony with God. The use of leaven—or yeast—was strictly forbidden in all Israel’s offerings made to the Lord by fire. During the Passover feast, the Jews were commanded to remove every particle of leaven from their houses. (Exod. 12:15,19) The idea which the Bible associates with leaven is its corrupting influence. It is to this property of leaven that Jesus refers when he speaks of “the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees.” (Matt. 16:6) The apostle speaks of the “old leaven . . . of malice and wickedness.”—I Cor. 5:7,8

The parable states that a “woman” hid leaven in three measures of meal. This would seem to picture the false church system to which the names “that woman Jezebel” and “the woman . . . arrayed in purple and scarlet” are given in the Book of Revelation. (Rev. 2:20; 17:1-6) The fact that the woman “hid” the leaven in the meal suggests something which was not done openly. The meal, we believe, represents the spiritual food which the Lord provided for his people—the precious doctrines of God’s plan of redemption and restoration for the sin-cursed and dying race. The three measures of meal could be intended to emphasize three basic truths of God’s Word—namely, death as “the wages of sin,” the “redemption that is in Christ Jesus,”

and the “restitution of all things” during Christ’s kingdom.—Rom. 6:23; 3:24; Acts 3:20,21

Associated with these basic truths are various other doctrines, which together comprise God’s plan of the ages. The “woman” of the parable mingled corrupting elements of false doctrine with these truths until they finally lost their purity in the minds of most believers. Eternal torture was substituted for death as the penalty for sin. The doctrine of the ransom was corrupted by the unscriptural theory of the trinity. The hope of resurrection, or restitution, was also no longer meaningful. Indeed, there could be no resurrection of the dead if no one were really dead, but possessed an immortal soul—another idea not supported by the Bible.

The parable states that as a result of the leaven hidden in the meal “the whole was leavened.” History reveals that this literally came true, for it is almost impossible to find a single doctrine of God’s plan of salvation properly set forth in the dogmas of Christendom. Thus, the parable of the leaven can also be considered a prophecy of the extent to which the counterfeit church system would corrupt the true teachings of the Word of God.

HIDDEN TREASURE AND A PEARL

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto treasure hid in a field; the which when a man hath found, he hideth, and for joy thereof goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man, seeking goodly pearls: Who, when he had found one pearl of *(Continued on page 36)*

(Continued from page 31) great price, went and sold all that he had, and bought it.”—Matt. 13:44-46

In these three verses, we have the record of two more parables of the “kingdom of heaven” related by Jesus. The first pertains to a man who found treasure hidden in a field, and who sells all his possessions in order to raise funds to purchase the field, and thus obtain the treasure. The second tells of a merchant seeking valuable pearls, and upon finding one of great worth sold all that he had and purchased the pearl. Here again we find that Jesus offered no explanation of these parables. However, the general lesson taught by them is, we believe, quite obvious.

Both of these parables relate, not to the earthly blessings which will be made available to mankind through the agencies of the kingdom when it is established throughout the earth in power and great glory, but to the priceless opportunity that is offered to some during the present age of securing a position with Jesus in the heavenly rulership of his kingdom. It is somewhat akin to what Paul refers to as the privilege given to a few of running toward “the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.”—Phil. 3:14

The pearl of great price and the hidden treasure are, according to the parables, of such high value that those finding them do not hesitate selling everything they have in order to obtain them. The nature of the “treasure” is not mentioned, but its great value is stressed. The man who finds the treasure “hideth [it], and for joy thereof goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field.” The thought seems to be that upon finding the hidden

treasure, the man hides it in a safe place until he can raise the necessary funds to purchase the field.

In the second parable, the pearl is described as one of “great price.” Apparently the great value of the hidden treasure and of the pearl is one of the main points for consideration in both of these parables. The fact that a pearl is used rather than a ruby, diamond, or other precious gemstone would seem to be of no special significance, since they all require diligent searching in order to be found. These two parables are the same from the standpoint that, in both cases, the man who finds the treasure and the merchant who discovers the pearl sell all that they have in order to secure the purchase of them. In seeking the lessons of these parables, this similarity is an important clue to their meaning.

LESSONS SHOWN

Jesus said to the rich young ruler, “Go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me.” (Matt. 19:21) When the disciples asked further concerning this, Jesus explained, “Ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”—vs. 28

This is one of the Bible’s descriptions of the precious heavenly kingdom treasure to be obtained by the faithful followers of Jesus—those who are willing that it shall cost them all that they have and are. However, it should be remembered that Jesus was the first and chief one to gain this

treasure, and that it is his perfect example of giving all that his dedicated followers must emulate if they are to share the treasure with him.

Jesus did indeed give all in order to obtain this treasure. He gave the glory which he had with the Heavenly Father "before the world was." (John 17:5) He then gave his perfect humanity, his flesh, for the "life of the world." (chap. 6:51) In point of fact, Jesus was the one who actually purchased the "field," and obtained the right to the "treasure" which it contained. In addition to the treasure, he obtained of immortality, and that of attaining the high office of "King of kings, and Lord of lords," Jesus will also have as a "treasure" his joint-heirs, who will be his "bride" in the heavenly phase of his kingdom.—John 5:26; II Tim. 1:10; Rev. 17:14; 21:9

The footstep followers of Jesus are to share his honor and glory with him on condition that they also give up all that they have. Paul wrote, "What things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith: That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death; If by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead."—Phil. 3:7-11

ONE IMPORTANT DIFFERENCE

There is one important difference between the parables of the treasure and of the pearl. In the first one, the man seemingly finds the treasure hidden in a field without specially searching for it. In the second one, the pearl merchant was seeking “goodly pearls,” and then found one. Both of these situations could well illustrate that which is true of those whom God calls to joint heirship with Jesus.

It has been the testimony of some who receive a knowledge of God’s plan, and of the High Calling of God in Christ Jesus, that they apparently “just happened” to come across it. They perhaps found a tract or booklet at a restaurant, or some other public place. They happened to tune in to a station on their radio, television, or the Internet, which was broadcasting the Gospel message of truth. Actually, however, we know that it is by the Lord’s overruling providence that anyone is drawn to the Truth and to a knowledge of the heavenly treasures.

On the other hand, there must be an earnest longing to know the Lord and to know his plans and purposes. This could be illustrated by the merchant seeking goodly pearls. “Seek, and ye shall find,” Jesus said. (Matt. 7:7) This is true if the seeking is in sincerity, and the Lord sees in the heart the true spirit of humility and dedication which leads to consecration. The Lord does not call the indifferent, but only those humbly searching after truth and righteousness.

The Psalmist David wrote, “I waited patiently for the LORD; and he inclined unto me, and heard my

cry.” (Ps. 40:1) This is the attitude of the seekers after the Lord and his ways. When the Lord “inclines” unto them, it often seems to have “just happened.” However, this is not really the case, for his providences overrule and direct in the lives of all those whom he calls, and this includes the manner in which the Truth is first brought to their attention. It is the Truth that reveals the heavenly treasures—the “pearl of great price.” Our part, shown in both parables, is our willingness to “sell” all we have in order to participate in the joys of the heavenly kingdom, as joint-heirs with Jesus Christ.

It is not possible in any parable to find an application for every detail, and they are not designed for that purpose. It would be difficult, for example, to make a spiritual application of the fact that the man who found the treasure in the field hid it until he could buy the field. In keeping with the customs of the time, this apparently was a necessary procedure in order ultimately to become the legal possessor of the treasure.

The important thing is the man’s willingness that the treasure cost him all that he had. That is the chief lesson for us in both of these parables. If we have found the “treasure,” and if we have found the “pearl of great price,” are we giving up everything in order to make these our own? Are we, like Paul, counting all things else as loss that we may win Christ, and attain “the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus?”

NET CAST INTO THE SEA

The last of the five short parables to be considered in this lesson contains these words of Jesus:

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a net, that was cast into the sea, and gathered of every kind: Which, when it was full, they drew to shore, and sat down, and gathered the good into vessels, but cast the bad away. So shall it be at the end of the world [age]: the angels shall come forth, and sever the wicked from among the just, And shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth.”—Matt. 13:47-50

As in the foregoing parables of our lesson, “the kingdom of heaven” in this parable is not the kingdom established and reigning in the earth in power and glory, but the heavenly phase of that kingdom in preparation. When Jesus called his disciples into the ministry he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” (Matt. 4:19) Fishing with nets is the illustration used in the parable, which was the principal method employed in Jesus’ day.

The apostles who had been fishermen would know that when a net is cast into the sea there is no way to control what sort of fish are caught in it, and that after the net is drawn ashore the fish must be sorted. They would therefore readily grasp the idea that as “fishers of men” some undesirables would find their way into the “net,” and that these likewise would need to be separated from the others.

Jesus presented this parable as covering the entire Gospel Age, and indicated that the sorting of the fish would take place at the end of the age. This applies, however, only in a very general way. It is not as though the early disciples cast the net into the sea, and that only at the end of the age the net

is drawn ashore. Actually, each individual disciple of Christ throughout the age has likewise been a “fisher of men,” and has drawn his individual “net” ashore many times.

The general lesson of the parable, however, is to point out what the Lord would accomplish at the end of the Gospel Age. In this respect, the lesson is similar to the one taught by the parable of the wheat and the tares, considered previously, in which a separation is also pointed out. In that lesson, we saw that “tares” are counterfeit “wheat.” In this parable, however, nothing is said about the rejected fish in the net being counterfeits of the approved fish. We do not need to pass judgment on individuals to recognize that throughout the professed Christian world, and during this entire age, there have been millions of honorable people who have found their way into the “Gospel net.” Yet, in the true sense of the word, most have not been fully consecrated followers of the Master—recipients of the “high calling of God.”

The “angels” who are sent forth at the end of the age to sort the fish are the same servants of the Lord who did the fishing. This does not mean, however, that these “fishers of men” are any more qualified to judge the good, and separate the evil from the good, than were the Lord’s people throughout the age. It is the message they proclaim that does the separating. Those to whom the Lord gives ears to hear, understand, and appreciate the “mysteries of the kingdom of heaven,” by their own choice, will separate themselves from those who have no ear for the Truth. Thus, it is the mighty power of the Gospel that does the separating work.

The reason that the accomplishing of this work is more particularly true in the end of the age than at earlier periods is that the pure Gospel message was largely hidden for many centuries by the false creeds of men. There were a few in every generation who held tenaciously to the main principles of the Bible, but there was almost no opportunity to make a public proclamation of its message. As a result, its influence among the great mass of professing Christians was negligible.

However, in his providence the Lord, in the end of the age, has made a dramatic change in this situation. With his blessing and by his grace, “the children of the kingdom” are able to give a wide witness to the Gospel message of the kingdom. This witness has stirred many to take a stand for it, and separate themselves from those who are believers only in name, who, realizing the unpopularity of the Truth, are quite willing to have it so.

THE FURNACE OF FIRE

In this parable also, as in the parable of the wheat and the tares, those who are not the Lord’s true people, but merely associated with them for a time, are said to be “cast . . . into the furnace of fire.” The further explanation is given by Jesus that “there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth.”

This is one of the texts seized upon by those who search the Bible for proof of the God-dishonoring doctrine of eternal torture. They reason that here is a mention of fire, and also a statement by Jesus which seemingly suggests that those in the fire are being tormented. What other reason could they have, it is argued, for the “wailing and gnashing of teeth?”

We are confident, however, that this is not the lesson of the parable. Jesus said to those who rejected him in his day, "There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when ye shall see Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets, in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrust out." (Luke 13:28) The ancient faithful servants of the Lord are to be raised from the dead to be the earthly rulers in the Messianic kingdom. This was the position sought by many of Israel's religious leaders in Jesus' day. He simply pointed out to them how disappointed they would be, when raised from the dead, to see that those more worthy occupied the position they believed belonged to them.

This, we believe, is a good illustration of what is signified by the expression, "wailing and gnashing of teeth," in the parable. It does not denote physical torment, nor is it to be taken literally. Rather, it is a symbol of keen disappointment, just as in the case of Jesus' words to the leaders of his day. Thus it will be with those "fish" in the "net" who are not accepted as the true disciples of Christ to live and reign with him. They will be deeply saddened to have missed such a wonderful opportunity to be part of the heavenly phase of the kingdom.

The "fish" who are cast out are great in number. Through the deceptive teachings fostered by Satan, they have thought that a rule of righteousness could be set up throughout the earth by human efforts. However, the prophecies of the Bible reveal that all of man's attempts to accomplish this will fail—that the organization of this present world will collapse in "a time of trouble, such as never was since there

was a nation.” (Dan. 12:1) It is this “time of trouble,” we believe, that is symbolized by “the furnace of fire” mentioned in the parable.

The casting of the “fish” into the furnace of fire does not denote the destruction of individuals, but merely the destruction of their identity as supposed followers of Jesus. As individuals, these, even as those who were once tares, will have an opportunity later to receive life-giving blessings on Earth as subjects of the kingdom of Christ. It is said of those who obediently follow the laws of that kingdom from the heart, that they “shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son.”—Rev. 21:7 ■