

The Leaven of Corruption

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

—*Matthew 13:33*

THE BIBLE’S FIRST REFERENCES to leaven are in connection with Jehovah’s instructions concerning the original Passover supper, which was eaten by the Israelites the evening before they were delivered from their bondage in Egypt. The bread used at

the Passover meal was to be unleavened—that is, made without yeast. (Exod. 12:3-11) At this time God also gave instructions concerning a seven-day feast which would immediately follow the keeping of 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.”—vs. 15

The use of leaven was prohibited by the Lord in connection with all the sacrifices which the Israelites offered to him. We gather from this that he considers leaven as an illustration of sin in all its various

corrupting aspects. This thought is borne out in the New Testament.

Jesus said to his 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 it is 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

CORRUPTING DOCTRINE

From the foregoing passage it is evident that Jesus used leaven as a symbol of the erroneous and corrupting 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, for example, taught that there is no resurrection of the dead. (Matt. 22:23) This erroneous teaching alone corrupts and destroys a fundamentally critical doctrine of Christ.

Jesus said, “You scribes and Pharisees, play-actors! You scour sea and land to make a single convert, and then you make him twice as ripe for destruction as you are yourselves.” (Matt. 23:15, *J. B. Phillips New*

Testament) How this emphasizes the corrupting influence of false teachings! Surely it makes clear to us the importance of being sure that the doctrine which we believe and teach is fully in harmony with the Word of God.

The scribes and Pharisees without doubt held to some of the truths set forth by the Mosaic Law and Israel's prophets, but they had gone beyond these inspired sources of truth, and had accepted and allowed themselves to be influenced by the teachings of human tradition. It was these teachings, unauthorized by God to be added to the law he had given to Israel through Moses, which had so corrupted what they believed that their service to the Lord was not acceptable to him.

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 practices with respect to their service for God. Although technically they still sat in "Moses' seat," Jesus advised his followers not to follow their example of conduct.

The Master 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

Later in this chapter Jesus continues his reproof of the corrupt practices of these religious leaders of Israel. “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 widow’s houses, and for a pretence make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation [Greek: judgment].”—vss. 13,14

We have quoted sufficient to establish the point that in character as well as in doctrine the Jews’ religious leaders of Jesus’ day 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 the Israelites. This was a double-minded condition of hypocrisy, and Jesus spoke of it as leaven which had entered and was influencing Herod.

We do not need to conclude that all of Israel’s religious leaders had been corrupted by symbolic leaven. There was Nicodemus, for example, a Pharisee who went to the Lord in sincerity to learn more of the truth concerning this man whom his associates so greatly opposed. (John 3:1-11) There was also Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Jewish council, who became a believer in Jesus as the Messiah.—Luke 23:50,51; John 19:38

Certainly among others not leaders in Israel, there 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, and not corrupted by the "leaven" which was so prevalent around him.

PAUL'S TESTIMONY

In the church at Corinth there was an individual who was not deporting himself in harmony with the principles of righteousness. 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 the apostle 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 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 chapter 5. In verses 1-8 Paul refers to one or more who had come in among the brethren with teachings contrary to the truth, specifically, that all believers in Christ must be circumcised. Some apparently had been influenced by this false teaching, and had ceased for a time to "obey the truth." Paul emphasizes that this erroneous doctrine they had accepted did not come from the Lord, and then adds again the words, "A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump."—vs. 9

Turning again to I Corinthians 5, we find Paul elaborating further: “Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.”—vss. 7,8, *English Standard Version*

We note the expression, “leaven of malice and evil.” This is a true explanation of what is represented in the Scriptures by leaven. Nothing good, noble or praiseworthy is ever symbolized by leaven; but as we have seen, it represents false doctrine, hypocrisy and other corrupting qualities. In these verses Paul is giving, in particular, an admonition that the brethren might be properly prepared in their hearts for the Memorial season. However, it is a lesson which all the consecrated should take to heart and apply every day of the year.

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

In the parable quoted in our opening Scripture, Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven is like leaven which a woman put in three measures of meal until it was all leavened. This furnishes another interesting study regarding the symbolism of leaven. To understand this lesson, however, it is essential to know what Jesus meant in this parable by the words, “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, which is yet future. Paul wrote that the Heavenly Father has “delivered

us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of God's dear Son." (Col. 1:13) *Thayer's Greek Definitions* defines the word rendered "translated" in this verse as denoting a "change of situation." This properly identifies the individual change and transformation of character and work among God's consecrated people in preparation for the kingdom. That 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.

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 as "the kingdom of heaven," is shown to have had evil introduced into its midst. The parable shows, in other words, that in the development of those who will live and reign with Christ in his kingdom, they become subjected to efforts by Satan, God's "enemy" and the "wicked one," to divert them from their goal of joint heirship with Christ.

THREE MEASURES OF MEAL

In the short parable concerning leaven being put into three measures of meal until the whole was leavened, we are presented with another lesson concerning the development of the kingdom. Here again, as throughout the Scriptures, leaven is used as a symbol of a corrupting influence. In this case the corruption takes place in the spiritual food, the teachings, which are 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 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 present age who are following in the footsteps of Jesus, and who have been made partakers of the heavenly calling. This is their food, their “meal,” which was given first to the apostles by Jesus, and through them to the entire company of consecrated believers. It is by this food that they are to be spiritually nourished, and thus made ready for their glorification with Jesus in his kingdom of power and glory, through which all mankind will be blessed.

However, it was not long after the apostles fell asleep in death that error, or leaven, began to be injected into this pure food which the Lord had furnished. It was almost imperceptible to start with, but this leavening continued, growing to such an extent that nearly all of the pure spiritual food provided by the Lord became corrupted. The great deceiver, the “enemy,” Satan, was responsible for this, though he used human instruments, as well as civil and religious systems, to complete the corrupting work.

DOCTRINE CORRUPTED

In the parable Jesus speaks of three measures of meal being corrupted, well signifying three fundamental teachings of Jesus and the apostles in which leaven was later “hid” until each key doctrine became greatly contaminated. 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 plainly that if he partook of the forbidden fruit he would die. (Gen. 2:17) The Apostle Paul wrote with clarity, "The wages of sin is death."—Rom. 6:23

This simple truth, however, was corrupted by the "leaven" put into the "meal." The erroneous theory of the immortality of the soul developed, which claims that when a man dies his soul remains alive, and that actually there is no such thing as death. Out of this error came various "no death" teachings, including the claim of eternal torment as "the wages of sin," instead of death. If, according to this corrupting theory, no one really dies, then there can be no resurrection of the dead. Thus, the teaching of the resurrection also became corrupted.

Even more fundamental is the manner in which this particular false theory has corrupted the doctrine of the ransom as set forth in the Word of God. According to the Scriptures, Jesus died for the sins of the people, being a substitute in death for father Adam, and through him for the entire race. (Rom. 5:12,18,19; I Tim. 2:5,6; I John 2:2) However, if there is no death, then Jesus did not die, and this beautiful doctrine of redemption is corrupted and destroyed.

How glad we are to know, however, that Satan's words to Eve, "ye shall not surely die," was a blatant lie, and as Jesus said of him, "he is a liar, and the father of it." (Gen. 3:4; John 8:44) Concerning a correct understanding of the death condition, the Scriptures are clear: "The soul that sinneth, it shall die." "For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not any thing." "There is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave,

whither thou goest.” (Ezek. 18:4; Eccles. 9:5,10) How thankful we are, too, that the Scriptures also provide the hope of a resurrection from the dead. “The hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth.” “There shall be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and unjust.” (John 5:28,29; Acts 24:15) These are the pure, unleavened truths found in the Bible.

Another of the “measures” of meal might well be the teachings of the Bible with respect to God’s Messianic kingdom arrangement for the blessing and recovery of all the families of the earth. According to the Scriptures this kingdom in power and great glory was to be set up following the second advent of Jesus who, together with those who had faithfully suffered and died with him, would be the ruling “Christ” class.—Gen. 12:3; 22:18; Luke 19:10; Acts 3:20-25; Rev. 20:6; 21:1-5

This simple truth also became corrupted with leaven. Instead of waiting for this development in God’s “due time,” Satan caused the establishment of a counterfeit system which claimed to be the kingdom of Christ, and that there was no future kingdom beyond this. This cast a shadow over the promises of God with respect to the blessing of “all the families of the earth” through the agencies of the kingdom. Furthermore, if the church was reigning with Christ in this life, the promises of future glory with him in the kingdom were made meaningless. Here again, the Scriptures are clear. “Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.” (Rev. 2:10) Similarly, Paul realized that he must suffer and die before his hope of reigning with Christ could be realized.—II Tim. 2:11,12; 4:6-8

MAN'S ETERNAL HOME

The third measure of meal corrupted by leaven might well be the teaching of the Bible with respect to God's provision for the earth to be man's eternal home. When the erroneous teaching developed, as previously considered, that people only "seem" to die, but actually possess an immortal soul, it led to a further corruption of spiritual food. Leaven was introduced which claimed that one day the earth would be literally destroyed, and man would no longer enjoy it as his home.

The truth is, however, as set forth in the Bible, that "the earth abideth for ever," and not only this, but that God created the earth "not in vain," but he "formed it to be inhabited." (Eccles. 1:4; Isa. 45:18) Without this appreciation, the hope of the restoration of man to live on the earth forever is completely corrupted. The purpose of our Lord's return is also made void, and millions of professed followers of Jesus are left in confusion so far as their understanding of the plan of redemption is concerned.

Over the span of many centuries, a majority of professed Christians have been led away in a large measure from the real teachings of the Bible. We rejoice that in this end of the Gospel Age the Lord has furnished his faithful people with "meat in due season," replenishing the "unleavened" food which was originally provided by Jesus and the apostles. Soon, this "feast of fat things" will be made available to all people, and they will finally understand the glorious plan of God.—Matt. 24:45; Luke 12:42; Isa. 25:6-9 ■