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THE MYSTERY OF THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

“The disciples came and said to him, ‘Why do you speak to them in parables?’ And he answered and said to them. ‘To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted...therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand’” (Matt. 13:11, 13). *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* states that mysteries in scripture are “divine plans, concealed from all except the recipients of revelation, concealed until God’s good time; or, in other words, a divine secret, but one designed by God to be revealed when and to whom He chose.” Paul shows that mysteries were revealed secrets, Divine purposes hidden from humanity for long ages but finally disclosed by revelation to all people (Rom.16:25-26); however the mysteries are proclaimed to all even though they are understood only by those to whom they have been revealed. There are twenty-two “mysteries” recorded in the New Testament and all have been revealed by the Apostles and can be understood by all who believe.

One of the great mysteries of the Bible is the mystery of the kingdom of God. Jesus revealed this mystery in the parables recorded in Matthew 13:1-50 and Mark 4:1-32. When he first began teaching in parables the Apostles did not understand and questioned him as to why he was teaching in parables: Matthew 13:10, 11: “and the disciples came and said to him, ‘Why do you speak in parables’ and he answered and said to them, ‘to you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted’”... Mark 4:10, 11: “As soon as he was alone, his followers, along with the twelve, began asking him about the parables. And he was saying to them, ‘to you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God; but those who are outside get everything in parables.’” The first use of the term “mystery” in reference to the kingdom is in Daniel 2 where it is used five times in reference to Nebuchadnezzar’s dream concerning the kingdom and three times showing God to be the revealer of mysteries. The word is used four times in the gospels referring to the “mystery of the Kingdom” in Jesus’ teaching in parables (Matt. 13:11; Mark 4:11; Luke 8:10).

Daniel’s interpretation of the dream of Nebuchadnezzar was concerning four kingdoms before the kingdom of heaven would be set up (Dan 2:44). Three of these kingdoms are named as being: Babylon (2:38); Media/Persia (8:20) and Greece (8:21). The fourth kingdom is not mentioned by name, but we can conclude it was Rome (the kingdom following Alexander the Great’s rule in Greece, and was the ruling power in the time of the New Testament). It was “in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up the kingdom which will never be destroyed, and put an end to all these kingdoms, but it will endure forever” (Dan. 2:44) Of the fourth kingdom it is said that its “dominion will be taken away, annihilated destroyed forever” (Dan. 7:26). The Jewish scriptures had prophesied that the Messiah (Christ) would be “installed upon Zion and given the nations as an inheritance” and he would “break them with a rod of iron, and shatter them like earthenware” (Psalm 2:6-9). Further: “He will

shatter kings in the day of his wrath and judge among the nations, he will fill them with corpses and shatter the chief men over a broad country” (Psalm 110:5, 6). No wonder the Jews thought the Kingdom of heaven would free them from the Roman rule, and “restore the kingdom of Israel” (Acts 1:6). However Jesus preached the kingdom but the world went on as before. How could this be the kingdom? The Jews could not accept the fact of the kingdom being ushered in by such a one as described in Isaiah 41:1-4 and quoted in Matthew 12:18-21: “Behold My servant whom I uphold; My chosen one in whom My soul delights, I have put My Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry out or raise his voice, nor make his voice heard in the street, a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not extinguish; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not be disheartened or crushed until he has established justice in the earth and the coastlands will wait expectantly for his law.” Their thought was: how can this man from Galilee be the Messiah ushering in the kingdom for “surely the Christ is not going to come from Galilee...no prophet arises out of Galilee” (John 7:41, 52). This carpenter from Nazareth (can any good thing come out of Nazareth? John 1:47), rejected by the religious leaders, dined with tax-collectors and sinners, with his motley band of half-literate bunch of fishermen, a tax-gatherer and two Zealots, just how could they have anything to do with the the kingdom? It is significant that Jesus began his ministry preaching “the gospel of the kingdom” (Matt. 4:17, 23, 9:35; Mark 1:14,15 John 3:3, 5). This “gospel of the kingdom” was the recurring theme of Christ’s teaching throughout the gospels ending with these words: “And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all nations, and then the end shall come” (Matt. 24:14). In the beginning of his ministry, as he announced that the kingdom of heaven was at hand and quoted such prophecies as Isaiah 61:1-4 (Luke 4:17-20) and Isaiah 42:1-4 (Matt. 12:18-21); prophecies of the coming Messiah which he applied to himself, he was welcomed in the synagogues by the common people, but the Pharisees “counseled together against him, how they might destroy him” (Matt. 12:14). Chapter 13 of Matthew seems to indicate a definite turning-point in his ministry. He is seen less and less in the synagogues and now preached in the open air, in the small villages and from the seashore.

The kingdom that he had announced was “at hand” now became “the mystery of the kingdom”. The mystery of the kingdom was that it would not come in the blazonry fanfare and military expectation of the Jews. George Eldon Ladd defines it quite well in *A Theology of the New Testament*: “The mystery of the Kingdom is the coming of the Kingdom into history in advance of its apocalyptic manifestation. It is, in short, ‘fulfillment without consummation’. This is the single truth illustrated by the several parables of Mark 4 and Matthew 13.”

How much of “the gospel of the kingdom” do we hear preached in our churches today? The kingdom of heaven still seems to be a mystery in most of our churches. Charles Taber, Professor Emeritus of World Missions, Emanuel School of Religion, Johnson City, Tenn. Is quoted in *Focus on the Kingdom* as

stating: "I read with interest the nine statements attempting to answer the question, 'What is the Gospel?' I am amazed and dismayed to find not even a passing mention of the theme which was the core of Jesus' gospel in three of the four accounts: the Kingdom of God. Every one of these statements reflect the individualistic reduction of the gospel that plagues American evangelicalism." If the kingdom is mentioned in our pulpits or writings there are basically two interpretations given: either it is said to be the church or a future "millennial" kingdom after Christ returns.

There is a future reign of Christ upon the earth when he returns and "the kingdoms of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and His Christ and he will reign forever and ever" (Rev. 11:15). Further: "...thou didst purchase for God with thy blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. And thou hast made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God, and they will reign upon the earth" (Rev. 5:9, 10). In 11 Timothy 2:12 Paul states: "if we endure we shall also reign with him." The kingdom began with Christ, was confirmed by his resurrection and ascension (Eph. 1:20-23) and will continue until "he delivers up the kingdom to the God and Father; when he has abolished all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all enemies under his feet" (I Cor. 15:24, 25). The kingdom that is to come in demonstrative power and glory has already entered the world in hidden form and is at work in a world that doesn't recognize it. This is the mystery of the kingdom. The religious leaders in Jesus' day did not believe a man like him had anything to do with the kingdom.

There is a popular interpretation that the church is the kingdom. However the word "church" and "kingdom" show that they are not the same thing. The word for church is *ekklesia*, a combination of the words "*ek*" (out of) and "*klesis*" (a calling) meaning "called out". The word "kingdom" is *basileia* and means "reign" or "rule" (II Tim. 2:12). The church is the people of the kingdom but not the kingdom itself. The kingdom is the rule of God; the church is an assembly of His people. The kingdom is not limited to being the church. "For the kingdom is Jehovah's and He rules over the nations" (Psalm 22:28) and "...the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind, and bestows it on whom He wishes, He sets over it the lowliest of men." (Dan. 4:17). There are many passages that speak of our entering the kingdom that are different than those that speak of entering the church.

George Ladd in *A Theology of the New Testament* sums it up in these words: "While there is an inseparable relationship between the kingdom and the church, they are not to be identified. The kingdom takes its point of departure from God, the church from human beings. The kingdom is God's reign and the realm in which the blessings of his reign are experienced; the church is the fellowship of those who have experienced God's reign and entered into the enjoyment of its blessings. The kingdom creates the church, works through the church, is proclaimed in the world by the church. There can be no kingdom without the church, those who have acknowledged God's rule, and there can be no church without God's kingdom; but they remain two distinguishable concepts: the rule of God and the fellowship of man."

The parables in Matthew 13 and Mark 4 show that the kingdom has entered the world, not in apocalyptic power, as the Jews

expected, but quietly and unobserved and seen only by those who received and understood them as a mystery that was revealed by Christ.

The parable of the sower (soils) Matt. 13:1-9; 18-23). The gospel of the kingdom is preached. It is rejected by most, but received by some. Regardless of the reasons given for its rejection the parable shows only a few understood, received the word and bore fruit. The parable shows that the word preached (seed sown) was definitely "the word of the kingdom" (Matt. 13:19). The Jews, as a nation rejected the word of the kingdom and was told: "Therefore, I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you, and given to a nation producing the fruit of it" (Matt. 21:43). **The parable of the tares** (Matt. 13:24-30; 36-43). Some interpret this parable as there being both good and evil in the church and when Christ returns they will be separated. However the field is not the church but the world (ver. 38). The "tares" gathered "out of the kingdom" and cast out are the Jews, referred to in Matthew 8:12 as "the sons of the kingdom" that rejected the kingdom and would be separated from those who accepted it. Again this shows the kingdom is present in the world but hidden from unbelievers until Christ returns. **The parable of the mustard seed** (Matt. 13:31,32; Luke 13:18,19). In his teaching Jesus uses the mustard seed to signify smallness (Matt. 17:20; Luke 17:6). Had Jesus said the kingdom was like a "stately cedar" where "all the nations would live under its shade" (Ezek. 17:23; 31:6) the Jews might have believed him. But a mustard seed? Can anything that small portray the kingdom? It was the insignificance of the ministry of Jesus in the eyes of the Jews that compelled them, who had such great expectations of the kingdom, to be able to accept that "the kingdom is at hand". **The parable of the leaven** (Matt. 13:33; Luke 13:20, 21). This parable presents the same truth as the parable of the mustard seed. However the emphasis is not so much on the smallness of the leaven, but the fact that it is hidden in the meal. The kingdom was hidden from the Jews and has been hidden through the years while the world goes on as it always has. There was no visible sign of the kingdom coming during the ministry of Christ and still it seems there is no great change in the world. But the kingdom is like leaven. It is hidden in the world, but is working as God intended it and will in the end when Jesus comes to reign with his saints envelop the whole world, and the "kingdoms of this world will have become the kingdom of our Lord and His Christ" Rev.11:15). **The parable of the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price** (Matt. 13:44-46). The overall message of these two parables is that the kingdom is of such inestimable value it is to be sought above anything else one could possess. The Jews saw no value in the ministry of Christ. In fact they saw him as a blasphemer (Matt. 26:65), a winebibber, gluttonous man and a friend of sinners (Matt 11:19), demon possessed (John 8:48, 52) and casting out demons by Beelzebul the prince of demons (Luke 11:16) and certainly no "King of the Jews" (John 19:21). **The parable of the net** (Matt. 13:47-50). The mystery of the kingdom in this parable is not so much that it's coming is not as the Jews expected, but that there will be those who identify themselves with the kingdom (Matt. 7:21-23) but have failed to do the will of the Father. Like the tares, they will be cast out.

Even after spending three and half years with him, he spent forty days after his resurrection with his disciples, "speaking of things concerning the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3). Still, after two thousand years of history the kingdom is still a mystery to many.

