

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT MYSTERIES

Part V

by Thomas Ice

We have seen previously that the Old Testament includes some mysteries or secrets, usually associated with providing new revelation in relation to the progressively unfolding plan of God for history. In a sense, the Old Testament provides a baseline for the revelation of God's plan for history in relation to the nation of Israel. This is in relation to the many Messianic prophecies that were fulfilled by Jesus at His first coming, as well as many still awaiting His second advent. Within the framework of God's plan for Israel and the nations, the mysteries relating to the Church Age are laid over the top of Old Testament revelation and provide an explanation for God's entire purpose for this age in relation to previous and future ages. The New Testament mysteries added to God's Old Testament revelation provides a complete overview of His entire plan for history, along with a glimpse of eternity. I will now turn my focus upon the New Testament mysteries and their contribution to understanding God's purpose for the Church.

MYSTERIES OF THE KINGDOM

Jesus' parables concerning the mysteries of the kingdom are found in all three synoptic gospels (Matt. 13:1–52; Mark 4:1–34; Luke 8:4–18). However, the term "mystery" is only used once in each narrative (Matt. 13:11; Mark 4:11; Luke 8:10). The most extensive version is found in Matthew; Mark is next, while Luke provides the shortest. Each of the three passages read as follows: "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' (Matt. 13:11). "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'" (Mark 4:11). "And He said, 'To you it has been granted to know the *mysteries* of the kingdom of God, but to the rest *it is* in parables, in order that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand'" (Luke 8:10). John MacArthur describes a mystery as follows: "So a 'mystery' (in the sense Jesus is using the term) is something either partially or completely hidden at one time that has now been fully revealed. Our Lord was about to start taking the lid off everything the Old Testament had kept shrouded in typology, symbolism, and prophetic hints."¹

Specifically applied to the mysteries of the kingdom in Matthew 13, Stanley Toussaint observes: "Since the Lord refers to these parables as containing truths which are mysteries, one may infer that they contain facts which were not revealed before the time He spoke them."² "It is extremely important that one notes that the new revelation concerns the kingdom of the heavens," declares Toussaint. "The same kingdom is in view in Matthew 13 as the one which was proclaimed as being at hand in Matthew 3:2; 4:17, and 10:17. In chapter thirteen the King is giving additional information concerning the kingdom of heaven, information that has never before been revealed. He is instructing His disciples regarding a hitherto unrevealed period of time prior to the establishment of the kingdom. This new age would not be the promised kingdom, nor would it be, strictly speaking, a kingdom in the so-called 'mystery form.' Thus the mysteries of the kingdom of the heavens relate to the span in which the millennial kingdom is being postponed."³

All three accounts emphasize the fact that only Jesus' disciples would be able to understand the meaning and significance of the parables. The people as a whole will

only receive from Jesus messages in the form of parables for the specific purpose of hiding the truth from them. MacArthur says, "Although Jesus was presenting the parables in a way that would obscure the truth from unbelieving ears, no one was excluded against his or her will. Anyone who truly wanted to understand could have asked."⁴

All three accounts quote from Isaiah 6:9, which says, "And He said, 'Go and tell this people: keep on listening, but do not perceive; keep on looking, but do not understand.'" Isaiah 6 is in the context of Isaiah's commission from God in which he was taken into the throne room of God in Heaven and then sent back to the nation of Israel. Jesus also is speaking to the nation of Israel when He applies this passage in the Gospels. The Isaiah quote is found in Luke 8:10, which also is the verse speaking of the mysteries of the kingdom. The Matthew and Mark references to Isaiah 6 are not in the verses that speak of the mysteries of the kingdom; instead they are found nearby in Matthew 13:14–15 and Mark 4:12. Matthew extends the quote to include Isaiah 6:10: "And in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says, 'You will keep on hearing, but will not understand; and you will keep on seeing, but will not perceive; for the heart of this people has become dull, and with their ears they scarcely hear, and they have closed their eyes lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart and return, and I should heal them'" (Matt. 13:14–15).

POSTPONEMENT OF THE KINGDOM

In my examination of the mysteries of the kingdom, I will be focusing primarily on Matthew's account since it is the fullest and most complete of the three accounts found in the Gospels. In Matthew 12 it is clear that the official leadership of the Jewish people lead the majority of Israel to reject Jesus as their Messiah. In fact, they attributed Christ's works to "Beelzebul the ruler of the demons" (Matt. 12: 24). Chapter 12 is a clear pivot for Matthew's Gospel since everything leading up to that point was a presentation of why Jesus was the predicted Messiah of Israel. After the rejection of Jesus as the Messiah in chapter 12, chapter 13 begins by saying, "On that day" (Matt. 13:1). Thus, on the very day of Christ's official rejection by the nation of Israel, Jesus shifts His ministry to only speaking publicly to the people in parables. "And He spoke many things to them in parables" (Matt. 13:3a).

Matthew 13 provides eight parables that speak to the status of the kingdom since Israel has rejected her Messiah and the condition for the arrival of the kingdom is that Israel must accept Jesus as their Messiah. The general message in chapter 13 is that there will be a kingdom for Israel but it has been postponed until a future time when the nation accepts the Messiahship of Jesus. Toussaint tells us: "The parables of Matthew 13 reveal new truths involving the preparation for the establishment of the kingdom during this time of postponement which was not predicted in Daniel's seventy weeks or other Old Testament prophecies."⁵

It is important to realize that Matthew 13:11 does not refer to a supposed mystery form of the kingdom during this age as some advocate. The text of Scripture for all three references (Matt. 13:11; Mark 4:11; Luke 8:10) says the same thing: "the mysteries of (or about) the kingdom." In order to advocate the view that it speaks of a mystery form of the kingdom in the present age one must bring such an idea from one's own imagination and slip it into the passage, since it is totally absent from the biblical text. Thus, Jesus speaks of new mysteries being revealed in light of Israel rejection of Him as Messiah. The new information about the kingdom is that there will be a kingdom in the future and that it will be postponed. The new information about the kingdom in

addition to its postponement is that there will be an interim program implemented between the two comings of Christ.

Later, in the epistles, our Lord will reveal the purpose of the Church in the inter-advent age, but at this point in the progress of God's revelation of His plan for history He is revealing some changes in the perception of His plan for Israel and the nations in light of the Jewish rejection of the Messiahship of Jesus. Alva McClain explains: "What is certain in the teaching of these difficult parables is that the present age, viewed from the standpoint of the Kingdom, is a time of preparation."⁶ Thus, we find in later revelation of God's plan for the church age its main purpose is defined by the Great Commission (Matt. 28:16–20; Mark 16:14–18; Luke 24:44–48; John 20:19–23; Acts 1:6–8) to proclaim the gospel to all nations and make disciples for Christ.

While the Church Age is not the kingdom, the purpose of this age is to call out Believers through the preaching of the gospel in this present age in order to reign and rule with Christ in His kingdom after the second advent. Christ makes this point when He says, "He who overcomes I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne" (Rev. 3:21). Presently, Christ is at the right hand of the Father in heaven and makes intercession for us. He is not sitting on David's throne in Jerusalem but will take His place there upon His future victorious return to planet earth. While our destiny as the Bride of Christ is to reign with Him we are not yet in the kingdom. Paul admonished the Believers in Antioch by "encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, 'Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God'" (Acts 14:22). Paul himself says in his final epistle: "The Lord will deliver me from every evil deed, and will bring me safely to His heavenly kingdom; to Him be the glory forever and ever. Amen" (2 Tim. 4:18). Maranatha!

(To Be Continued . . .)

ENDNOTES

¹ John MacArthur, *Parables: The Mysteries of God's Kingdom Revealed Through the Stories Jesus Told* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2015), p. 24.

² Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold The King: A Study of Matthew* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1980), p. 171.

³ Toussaint, *Behold The King*, p. 171.

⁴ MacArthur, *Parables*, p. 24.

⁵ Toussaint, *Behold The King*, p. 176.

⁶ Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom: An Inductive Study of the Kingdom of God* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1959), p. 441.