

**THE IMPORTANCE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT MYSTERIES**  
Part VIII  
by Thomas Ice

*“For truly I say to you, that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it; and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.”*

*“So that what was spoken through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, ‘I will open My mouth in parables; I will utter things hidden since the foundation of the world.’”*

—Matthew 13:17 and 35

In our study of the mysteries in the New Testament I have defined them as a secret part of God’s original plan for mankind that is revealed to the church. This understanding is supported by Matthew 13:17 and 35. Verse 17 is a clear reference to Old Testament prophets and righteous men who did not see prophetically many of the things that Jesus’ disciples were witnessing. They were hidden from those in the Old Testament, even though all of these events were part of God’s original plan from the beginning. This is known as progressive of revelation. Paul Enns says, “God did not reveal all truth about Himself at one time but revealed Himself ‘piecemeal,’ portion by portion to different people throughout history.”<sup>1</sup> Verse 35 clearly states the hidden things were always part of God’s original plan because they were “hidden since the foundation of the world.” Thus, the mysteries in Matthew and the rest of the New Testament are part of the progressive unveiling of God’s plan for the era called the church.

When it comes to the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven in Matthew or the kingdom of God in Mark and Luke, Jesus is using parables to blind the general public concerning His shift in the kingdom program, but then He reveals the significance to His disciples in private. Therefore the mysteries of the kingdom explain what will take place during the interim between Israel’s rejection of the King and thus the kingdom and the beginning of the postponed kingdom at a future time. That future time will be after the second coming of Christ when He will set up His kingdom reign for a thousand years here on planet earth. These nine parables explain what will take place in during the present church age and the seven-year tribulation. Since we are currently in the church age today, these mysteries apply to our present time. J. Dwight Pentecost says: “Thus these parables do not primarily concern the nature, function, and influence of the church. Rather, they show the hitherto unrevealed form in which God’s theocratic rule would be exerted in a previously unrevealed age necessitated by Israel’s rejection of Christ.”<sup>2</sup>

**THE MUSTARD SEED**

As we continue our trek through Christ’s parables concerning the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, we now arrive at His third parable, the well-known mustard seed parable found in verses 31 and 32. “He presented another parable to them saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field; and this is smaller than all other seeds; but when it is full grown, it is larger than the garden plants, and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches.’”

In order to understand Christ's intent in this parable, it is helpful to realize some of the Jewish rabbinical implications latent in the language He uses. Alfred Edersheim explains: "In fact, the expression, 'small as a mustard-seed,' had become proverbial, and was used, not only by our Lord, but frequently by the Rabbis, to indicate the smallest amount, such as the least drop of blood, the least defilement, or the smallest remnant of sun-glow in the sky. 'But when it is grown, it is greater than the garden-herbs.' Indeed, it looks no longer like a large garden-herb or shrub, but 'becomes' or rather appears like, 'a tree'—as St. Luke puts it, 'a great tree,' of course, not in comparison with other trees, but with garden-shrubs. Such growth of the mustard seed was also a fact well known at the time, and, indeed, still observed in the East."<sup>3</sup> It is important to realize that "this mustard plant is a species different than the common one used as a condiment."<sup>4</sup> Stanley Toussaint notes: "This of course is a reference to the extraordinary spread and growth of the kingdom message in the age before the kingdom is established. The King does not picture the coming of the kingdom here since it is impossible to do so in connection with its tree."<sup>5</sup>

To what does the mustard seed and the tree that grows out of that seed represent in this parable. Many have wrongly identified it as the church, however, such an association does not measure up to the rest of the New Testament's description of the true church—the body of Christ. I believe it refers to Christendom! Christendom loosely refers to all that is or can be associated with Christianity down through the church's history. Arno Gaebelin identifies it as, "this unnatural thing, this monstrosity, is professing Christendom as a system of the world, professing Christ, without possessing Him and His Spirit."<sup>6</sup> The interval period started out small but has now become associated with the largest religion in the world—Christianity.

The aspect of the parable that speaks of it growing larger than any of the other garden plants and developing large branches in which the birds come and rest on its branches is a concept found previously in the Old Testament. "The expression occurs frequently in the Old Testament (Daniel 4:12, 21; Ezekiel 17:23; 31:6; Psalm 104:12) and in each case it pictures the prosperity of a person or nation, primarily as seen by men."<sup>7</sup> Toussaint continues: "The preceding parable had taught the disciples that the field was the world; this parable instructs the followers of the Lord as to how the message of the kingdom would outwardly be received in the world."<sup>8</sup>

Throughout Scripture birds in the branches of trees are often a negative connotation. I think they are used that way in this passage as well since it is the outward provision that is depicted and not one's spiritual condition. Edersheim provides some excellent background material relating to the birds and branches: "The other concerning the birds which are attracted to its branches and 'lodge'—literally, 'make tents'—there, or else under the shadow of it, is subsidiary. Pictorial, of course, this trait would be, and we can the more readily understand that birds would be attracted to the branches or the shadow of the mustard-plant, when we know that mustard was in Palestine mixed with, or used as food for pigeons, and presumably would be sought by other birds. And the general meaning would the more easily be apprehended, that a tree, whose wide-spreading branches afforded lodgment to the birds of heaven, was a familiar Old Testament figure for a mighty kingdom that gave shelter to the nations. Indeed, it is specifically used as an illustration of the Messianic Kingdom."<sup>9</sup>

"Although left without interpretation," observes Walvoord, "it anticipated that Christendom as a sphere of profession will grow rapidly from a small beginning to an organization with great power and wealth. While the plant included both true believers and those who professed to believe, the mustard plant was distinguished from the birds

lodging in its branches which were unbelievers (cf. Dan 4:20–22)."<sup>10</sup> George H. Pember believed that this parable speaks of the growth into Christendom and noted the following: "The phrase represented in the Parable began to be developed in the early part of the fourth century, when Constantine was carried to the imperial throne upon the shoulders of his British legionaries, the great majority of whom were Christians, and a nominal Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire."<sup>11</sup> Pember further states: "The confusing and corrupting effects of Constantine's policy may be easily imagined: Christianity was transformed into a kind of Paganism with new names, and the world ceased to view it with disfavor."<sup>12</sup>

### CONCLUSION

The parable of the mustard seed teaches that while the kingdom will be postponed until the Messiah's second coming, the interadvent age will be a time in which God will still be at work. As noted from the previous parables, this time will be a time in which the word of God will be sown into the world. There will be various responses to His word, which is the gospel. Even though most will apparently reject this word, nevertheless, many will respond positively by faith. This period will also be a time in which a counter-sowing will take place by the Devil as he attempts to counterfeit God's program through the spread of false doctrine within the same field. In light of the mustard seed parable, God's program for this age will start out small and grow into a very large movement that we call Christendom, which will include both believers and unbelievers as time goes on. Supported by some of the later parables, it appears that the larger Christendom becomes the more apostate it becomes but the Lord will bring into His fold all of the elect. Maranatha!

**(To Be Continued . . .)**

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ: A Study of The Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), p. 214.

<sup>3</sup> Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus The Messiah*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1942), vol. I; pp. 592–93.

<sup>4</sup> John F. Walvoord, *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), p. 101.

<sup>5</sup> Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold The King: A Study of Matthew* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1980), p. 181.

<sup>6</sup> Arno C. Gaebelin, *The Gospel of Matthew: An Exposition* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1961), p. 284.

<sup>7</sup> Toussaint, *Behold The King*, p. 181.

<sup>8</sup> Toussaint, *Behold The King*, p. 182.

<sup>9</sup> Edersheim, *Life and Times of Jesus*, vol. I; p. 593.

<sup>10</sup> Walvoord, *Matthew*, p. 101.

<sup>11</sup> George H. Pember, *The Great Prophecies Concerning the Gentiles, The Jews, and the Church of God*, 4 vols. (Miami Springs, FL: Conley & Schoettle Publishing Company, 1984 [1887]), vol. 1; p. 307.

<sup>12</sup> Pember, *Great Prophecies*, vol. 1, p. 310.