

## *The Future: What Did Christ Predict?*

Reader, you might be thinking that this chapter should have come much earlier, even very close to the start. Indeed, I have considered moving it forward. But I have decided to leave it where it stands. It takes us back to the time before the crucifixion, before Pentecost and the establishment of the *ekklēsia*, before the *pseudadelphoi* came on the scene, and well before Christendom and all its conundrums were thought of. It gives us, as it were, an eagle-eye's view of the age from Pentecost until the end of time at the second coming of Christ. Now a great deal of history has been lived since Christ said these things to the first believers – 2000 years' worth, in fact – and when we come to glance at that long history, Christ's predictions must govern our understanding and interpretation of it.

And that is why I have left this chapter where it is.

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I might major on Matthew 24, but I do not. Although I will glance at that chapter, I want to concentrate on Matthew 13 – Christ's parables of the kingdom; namely, the parables of the Sower, the Weeds, the Mustard Seed, the Leaven and the Net. What do these parables tell us about what we should expect in the unfolding history of the *ekklēsia*, the gospel, the work of Christ in the world?

Without majoring on Matthew 24, thus avoiding the need to enter the minefield of its detailed prophetic-interpretation, that chapter is surely of high significance in this debate. I cannot see how anybody can read the chapter and come away confident that this age will be marked by growing triumph. I agree that we have this statement:

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This gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world (Matt. 24:14).

But look at the rest! Of the time following Christ's crucifixion until his re-appearing, we read:

See that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying: 'I am the Christ', and they will lead many astray. And you will hear of wars and rumours of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are but the beginning of the birth pains.

Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake. And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let the one who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house, and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak. And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a sabbath. For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short. Then if anyone says to you: 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There he is!' do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you beforehand. So, if they say to you: 'Look, he is in the wilderness', do not go out. If they say: 'Look, he is in the inner rooms', do not believe it. For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the

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coming of the Son of Man. Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.

Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other (Matt. 24:4-31).

If any reader thinks that passage spells a time of growing triumph for the *ekklēsia*, then nothing I can say can possibly bring about a change of opinion. But as I read the chapter, the overall picture is one of tragedy – in the sense of suffering saints, deceptive teachers, false gospels, tribulation, mourning, and so on.

But let me get to my main passage – Matthew 13 – and the parables.

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### ***The Parable of the Sower***

A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear (Matt. 13:3-9).

### ***Christ's Explanation of the Sower***

Hear then the parable of the sower: When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and

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immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty (Matt. 13:18-23).

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### ***The Parable of the Weeds***

The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him: ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?’ He said to them: ‘An enemy has done this’. So the servants said to him: ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ But he said: ‘No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers: “Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn”’ (Matt. 13:24-30).

### ***Christ’s Explanation of the Weeds***

The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who showed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear (Matt. 13:37-43).

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***The Parable of the Mustard Seed***

The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches (Matt. 13:31-32).

***The Parable of the Leaven***

The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened (Matt. 13:33).

***The Parable of the Net***

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. When it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers but threw away the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 13:47-50).

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First things first: these parables are ‘kingdom parables’; they concern ‘the kingdom of heaven’. This designation is unique to Matthew: the Bible generally speaks of ‘the kingdom of God’. Are these two the same? That is one question – to which different answers are given.

Another question: whether we are talking about ‘the kingdom of heaven’ or ‘the kingdom of God’, what is ‘the kingdom’? Opinions, again, are divided.

Simplistic this may be, but I am taking ‘the kingdom of heaven’ and ‘the kingdom of God’ to speak of God’s spiritual reign in this age *as it seems to us*. In other words, I take these parables to be Christ’s description of the progress of what purports to be,

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and what is seen to be, what we think to be, God's spiritual rule during this present age.

To simplify matters still further, I think that Christ here tells us in parable form what we are to expect of the gospel, the *ekklēsia* – or as it is far more commonly known now, during the reign of Christendom – the church, Christianity (if you will) during the time between Pentecost and the return of Christ.

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We learn, first of all, that Christ predicted that during this age there will a great deal of spiritual activity: sowing, whether the sowing of good seed – the word of God – or the sowing of bad seed – weeds, error, falsehood; kneading of dough; fishing, catching both good and bad fish in the net. Activity is the word!

Growth, expansion, will be another mark of this time. The sowing of seed leads to a harvest with its consequent multiplication of grain; leaven expands and spreads throughout the entire batch of dough; the mustard seed dies in the ground but develops into a great tree. Growth, expansion will mark this age.

But while the parables speak of activity and expansion, do they speak of triumph or tragedy for the gospel? Which best describes the overall picture?

True, there will be a good harvest with an ingathering of wholesome grain; some good fish will be caught in the net; and so on. But the overall picture is far from rosy. It is, at best, mixed. If I can use such a term, very mixed. The sower scatters his seed, and while some lands on good soil, much is lost on the wayside, on the rocky ground or among thorns. The field is sown with good seed, but the enemy sows weeds. The net lands good fish, but also bad. And while the growth of a great tree from the mustard seed, and the fermentation of the leaven, are often taken to speak of a glorious spiritual growth during this age, Scripture uses both images to speak of evil. Moreover, as

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Christ explained, the birds (Matt. 13:4) represent ‘the evil one’ (Matt. 13:19); or his agents.

As for leaven, we know that in preparation for the Passover:

...the people of Israel were required to go through their houses and remove every trace of leaven (Ex. 12:15-39; 13:3,7).

And the illustration is carried over into the new covenant; Paul, writing to the Corinthians was dogmatic:

Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? 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 (1 Cor. 5:6-8).

As he said to the Galatians:

You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion is not from him who calls you. A little leaven leavens the whole lump (Gal. 5:7-9).

As Christ himself had made clear, and repeatedly so:

‘Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees... How is it that you fail to understand that I did not speak about bread? Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees’. Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees (Matt. 16:6,11-12).

Again:

Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy (Luke 12:1).

And again:

Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod (Mark 8:15).

In the old covenant, leaven was forbidden in sacrifices (Ex. 23:18; 34:25; Lev. 2:11; 6:17; 10:12; Deut. 16:3-4). It could be

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used (Lev. 7:13; 23:17; Amos 4:5), but not on the altar (Lev. 2:11).

The position is clear: 'leaven', in Scripture, generally stands for evil.

As for the way Scripture uses the image of the 'tree', two Old Testament passages surely form the backdrop to Christ's use of the image in the parable; I refer to Nebuchadnezzar's vision of God's judgment upon him (Dan. 4:10-26), and Ezekiel's use of the tree to illustrate God's wrath against Assyria then Egypt (Ezek. 31:3-18):

Here is Daniel's interpretation of the king's vision:

My lord, may the dream be for those who hate you and its interpretation for your enemies! The tree you saw, which grew and became strong, so that its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth, whose leaves were beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in which was food for all, under which beasts of the field found shade, and in whose branches the birds of the heavens lived – it is you, O king, who have grown and become strong. Your greatness has grown and reaches to heaven, and your dominion to the ends of the earth. And because the king saw a watcher, a holy one, coming down from heaven and saying: 'Chop down the tree and destroy it, but leave the stump of its roots in the earth, bound with a band of iron and bronze, in the tender grass of the field, and let him be wet with the dew of heaven, and let his portion be with the beasts of the field, till seven periods of time pass over him', this is the interpretation, O king: It is a decree of the Most High, which has come upon my lord the king, that you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. You shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and you shall be wet with the dew of heaven, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, till you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will. And as it was commanded to leave the stump of the roots of the tree, your kingdom shall be confirmed for you from the time that you know that heaven rules. Therefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable to you: break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your

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iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed, that there may perhaps be a lengthening of your prosperity (Dan. 4:19-27).

And here is God's interpretation, (through Ezekiel) of the vision of the tree:

Because it [the tree, that is Assyria, then Egypt] towered high and set its top among the clouds, and its heart was proud of its height, I will give it into the hand of a mighty one of the nations. He shall surely deal with it as its wickedness deserves. I have cast it out. Foreigners, the most ruthless of nations, have cut it down and left it. On the mountains and in all the valleys its branches have fallen, and its boughs have been broken in all the ravines of the land, and all the peoples of the earth have gone away from its shadow and left it. On its fallen trunk dwell all the birds of the heavens, and on its branches are all the beasts of the field. All this is in order that no trees by the waters may grow to towering height or set their tops among the clouds, and that no trees that drink water may reach up to them in height. For they are all given over to death, to the world below, among the children of man, with those who go down to the pit...

On the day the cedar went down to Sheol I caused mourning; I closed the deep over it, and restrained its rivers, and many waters were stopped. I clothed Lebanon in gloom for it, and all the trees of the field fainted because of it. I made the nations quake at the sound of its fall, when I cast it down to Sheol with those who go down to the pit. And all the trees of Eden, the choice and best of Lebanon, all that drink water, were comforted in the world below. They also went down to Sheol with it, to those who are slain by the sword; yes, those who were its arm, who lived under its shadow among the nations.

Whom are you thus like in glory and in greatness among the trees of Eden? You shall be brought down with the trees of Eden to the world below. You shall lie among the uncircumcised, with those who are slain by the sword. This is Pharaoh and all his multitude (Ezek. 31:10-18).

As can be seen, neither passage speaks of the triumph of a kingdom; quite the reverse. Expansion, growth, yes, but definitely evil.

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Well, there it is. What we have to decide is whether or not what I have called 'the seeming work of God' during this age, is, according to Christ, going to be marked by Triumph or Tragedy? There will be much labour, much growth, much expansion, much seeming success, but will the overall result be good or bad? As before, it is not either/or; nevertheless, the picture Christ has painted is not altogether pleasant – it clearly does not lend itself to triumphalism.