

The Mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven

by Lewis Sperry Chafer

Lewis Sperry Chafer's sermon explores the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven as revealed through Daniel's prophecies and the parables of Jesus, emphasizing the significance of the church age and Israel's future restoration.

Scripture: Daniel 2:37, Daniel 9:24, Matthew 13:18-24, Luke 21:24, Romans 11:25, Romans 12:2, Galatians 1:4, Ephesians 1:23, 2 Thessalonians 2:8, 2 Timothy 4:10

Topics: "End Times", "Kingdom Prophecy"

Description

Lewis Sperry Chafer delves into the prophetic visions given to Daniel, outlining the course of the Gentile period from the last captivity to the second coming of Christ. Daniel's dreams and interpretations reveal the succession of Gentile world powers - Babylonia, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome. The seventy weeks of years mentioned by Daniel are divided into two distinct periods, one before the rejection of Christ and the other after. The church age, a mystery age, is not accounted for in the prophetic visions, and the final period of seven years, the great tribulation, is yet to come before the establishment of Messiah's kingdom.

Transcript

UNTO Daniel, a prophet of the exile, was given the vision of the course of the whole Gentile period extending from the last captivity to the second coming of Christ--that period spoken of in Scripture as "the time of the Gentiles" (Lk. xxi. 24). Daniel forecasts the movements of the successive Gentile world powers during this period. He first interprets King Nebuchadnezzar's dream (ii. 37-45) as descriptive of four successive world powers. The same is again revealed in Daniel's dream (vii. 1-28) by the vision of four beasts, and again in the dream as recorded in the eighth chapter.

By all these revelations the Gentile world governments then in view and which are to occupy the power and authority during the "times of the Gentiles," are seen to be Babylonia, Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome. The latter of these is seen to be divided and subdivided as are the legs and toes of the great image, thus anticipating the present division of that territory as gathered about the two centers, Constantinople and Rome and the final ten governments yet to hold sway simultaneously on the original Roman empire.

Daniel also sees the same period as continuing seventy weeks of years, or heptads (ix. 24-27). In this vision this Gentile time of seventy heptads is divided into two distinct periods. One, the time before the "cutting off" of Messiah, in other words, the rejection of Christ; and the other, the time after that event.

Sixty-nine weeks, or heptads, were required for the fulfillment of the first period. This began with Daniel's time, or when the edict to restore Jerusalem was sent forth, and ended with the cutting off of Messiah. This was exactly fulfilled in the 483 years (69x7) before Christ.

As the prophets in their foreview evidently took no account of time during which Israel was to be cut off from national blessings, the present church age, which began with the cross of Christ and ends at an unrevealed time, is in no instance considered in their foreview, and the remaining moments of the prophesied time will not be counted off until this mystery age of the church has been completed.

The remaining predicted period, the seventieth week, or heptad, which is the time of the great tribulation (ix. 27) has yet to run its course to complete the whole time required to "finish transgression, and to make an end of sin, and to make reconciliation for iniquity, and to bring in everlasting righteousness, and to seal up the vision and prophecy, and to anoint the Most Holy." Thus it would seem clear that a period of seven years (shortened a little, Mt. xxiv. 22) will follow the present unpredicted period of the out-calling of the church and precede the setting up of Messiah's kingdom. Notwithstanding the fact that the mystery age of the church did not come into the prophet's view, the time of the final heptad, or period of seven, was seen to be much delayed; for it was given to him to understand "what shall befall thy people in the latter days; for yet the vision is for many days."

Daniel sees the entire period of the "times of the Gentiles" extending from the captivity, through 483 years to the cross, and on beyond to the dateless coming of the "Ancient of Days" and the setting up of a kingdom by the God of Heaven which shall never be destroyed. "It shall break in pieces and consume all other kingdoms and it shall stand for ever" (ii. 44, 45; vii. 13, 14).

The portion of "the times of the Gentiles" following the cross, including as it does the church age, is clearly indefinite aside from the events assigned to Daniel's last "week" (cf. Dan. ix. 26 with Mt. xxiv. 6-14). This, as might be expected, is the divine method of accurately forecasting Israel's future while reserving any clear light on the sacred secret of this mystery age. There was no secret regarding the "times of the Gentiles," with the attending present position of Israel in the world; but hidden within that era is a briefer period, "the fullness of the Gentiles" (Rom. xi. 25) about which nothing had been revealed. It is the church that is the "fullness of him that filleth all in all," and that body completed is the "perfect stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. i. 23; iv. 13;

Acts xv. 13, 14; 1 Cor. xii. 12, 13). It is clear, therefore, that a mystery age has been thrust, as a parenthesis, into that which had been previously revealed for the fulfillment of the purpose of God.

The moral character of this mystery age at its beginning, like its moral development and end are clearly presented in the New Testament. At the very beginning the inspired writers spoke of it as an evil age: "Who gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us from this present evil world" (age, Gal. 1. 4). "And be not conformed to this world" (age, Rom. xii. 2). "For Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world" (age, 2 Tim. iv. 10). "In whom the god of this world (age) hath blinded the minds of them which believe not" (2 Cor. iv. 4). So the church was fully warned from the beginning as to this age, and taught concerning her pilgrim character while here and her holy calling and separateness from the "evil age."

A portion of the time during which Israel was to be dispersed and deprived of national blessing had been divinely accounted for by the "seventy weeks" revelation given to Daniel. The fact and purpose of this present mystery age was not mentioned in this revelation; hence there was need that this sacred secret

should be revealed when its time had fully come. This Jesus does in the seven parables of Matthew xiii., it being ever God's method to give a foreview of all His great purposes and undertakings. The course and moral development of this age is here divinely presented in these parables and this, together with Daniel's seventy weeks, completes the revelation with respect to the entire period known as "the times of the Gentiles."

In these parables this parenthetical age covering the timeless period between Daniel's sixty-ninth and seventieth weeks is treated as the mystery form of the kingdom of heaven. It is the government of God over a period of various mystery purposes in the earth, to wit; the continued blindness of Israel throughout the age, the consummation, at the end, of all forms of evil, and the out-calling of the Church.

Each of the age-characterizing mysteries is said to be terminated by the same event. The blindness of Israel, mentioned in Rom. xi. 25, is followed by the promise: "And so all Israel shall be saved: as it is written, There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob: for this is my covenant unto them, when I shall take away their sins" (Rom. xi. 25-27). So the career of the "Man of Sin," who is said to be the consummation of the "mystery of iniquity," is ended thus: "whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming" (2 Thess. ii. 8). So, also, it is written concerning the completion of the calling out of the church: "After this I will return " (Acts xv. 13-16). These great sacred secrets, it will be noticed, constitute the very elements in the parables which define the character and object of the age. In the first of the parables a sower goes forth to sow; but only a fourth part of the seed thus sown comes to full development. The parable is interpreted by Christ and so permits of no speculation:

"Hear ye therefore the parable of the sower. When any one heareth the word of the kingdom, and understandeth it not, then cometh the wicked one, and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart. This is he that received seed by the wayside.

But he that received the seed into stony places, the same is he that heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it; yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while: for when tribulation and persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended.

He also that received seed among the thorns is he that heareth the word; and the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful.

But he that received seed into the good ground is he that heareth the word, and understandeth it; which also beareth fruit, and bringeth forth, some an hundred fold, some sixty, some thirty" (Mt. xiii. 18-23).

In full agreement with experience during the past nineteen hundred years of Christian history the parable teaches that a great portion of those to whom the Word is preached are not saved by it, and lest it might be concluded by His hearers that, while this was the condition at the beginning of the age it would not be so at the end, the second parable, that of the wheat and the tares, immediately follows. This, like the first, is interpreted by Christ Himself and its meaning is made plain:

"He answered and said unto them, He that sowed the good seed is the Son of man; the field is the world; the good seed are the children of the kingdom; but the tares are the children of the wicked one; the enemy that sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the world (age); and the reapers are the angels.

As therefore the tares are gathered and burned in the fire; so shall it be in the end of the world (age). The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; and shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth.

Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Who hath ears to hear, let him hear" (Mt. xiii. 37-43).

In this parable the born-again ones, the members of His body, are seen as the "wheat," or the "children of God" amidst the whole sphere of religious profession and assumption. It is important to note the age-closing scenes according to this interpretation: "So shall it be in the end of the age." Certainly this does not depict a regenerated world. It clearly pictures an out-called people together with the full ripening of iniquity in the unregenerate portion of humanity.

The third parable is not interpreted, nor is any following it explained; but enough has been revealed by the two interpretations to form a key to all that follow. They present aspects of the kingdom of heaven in the one mystery form and so must be in fullest agreement. In the third parable He presents truth through the figure of the mustard seed and tree. Again the testimony of history and the teaching of the parable agree. The very small beginning in the early days of the church has developed out of all due proportion in mere members and includes all professing Christendom. The great tree now shelters even the birds of the air. It is significant that the birds of the first parable are represented as catching away the good seed. The truly saved ones are still a "little flock" compared with the multitude of nominal church supporters.

The fourth parable is of the three measures of meal. which all became leavened. Throughout the Bible leaven symbolizes evil, and Jesus fully defined His use of the word on other occasions. He used the word to represent evil doctrine to the extent of formality (Mt. xxiii. 14, 16, 23-28), unbelief (Mt. xxii. 23, 29; Mk. viii. 15), and worldliness (Mt. xxii. 16-21; Mk. iii. 6). Paul uses the same word with reference to "malice and wickedness" (1 Cor. v. 6-8). Its process of working is by a subtle permeating of the mass into which it is introduced.

This much misunderstood parable teaches, in accord with the other parables and all related Scripture, that which has proven to be consonant with experience in the history of the age, namely, that even the true believers, and certainly the mass of professors, will be sadly influenced by these various forms of evil. There can be no question but that this has been true to the present hour.

The fifth parable is evidently a teaching concerning Israel, His "treasure" (Ex. xix. 5 ; Deut. iv. 20), including all the tribes, hid in the field, which is the world. When He shall call forth His "treasure" it will be by virtue of the fact that He hath, as the Lamb of God, taken away the sins of the world. One, we are told, sold all and purchased that field. What Jehovah may do now, or at any time in behalf of any people, will be because of the atoning value of the priceless blood of His Son. The Only Begotten Son was given for the world.

The mystery of the church, the pearl of great cost, as set forth in the sixth parable, has already been considered. She is not now hid in the field, the world; but is being formed there, and is awaiting her coming glory when, in the ages to come, she shall display His glory and grace. She too is redeemed at the same priceless cost (1 Pet. i. 18).

The last parable restates the fact of the outworking of the two great mysteries--the out-called church and the mystery of iniquity, as co-existing to the time of the end. The good fish shall be gathered into vessels and the bad shall be cast away. "So shall it be in the end of the age."

Thus the three great mysteries of this mystery age were related in the teachings of Jesus to the beginning, course and end of the present age.

The following Scriptures give added light on the thought and expectation of Christ and the apostles concerning the course and end of this age:

"And Jesus answered and said unto them, Take heed that no man deceive you. For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many. And ye shall hear of wars and rumors of wars: see that ye be not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in divers places. All these are the beginning of sorrows" (Mt. xxiv. 4-8).

"But as the days of Noe were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be"(Mt. xxiv. 37).

"I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some" (1 Cor. ix. 22).

"Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils" (1 Tim. iv. 1).

"This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come" (2 Tim. iii. 1).

"But evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived" (2 Tim. iii. 13).

"For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables" (2 Tim. iv. 3, 4).

"Knowing this first, that there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts, and saying, Where is the promise of his coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation" (2 Pet. iii. 4).

To this may be added the other parables of Jesus regarding the kingdom in its mystery form and the whole divinely given history of the church as previewed in Rev. ii. 1--iii. 22. So, also, the more detailed description of the age-ending scenes as given by Daniel and in Rev. iv. 1--xx. 3.

There is an age of universal blessing coming upon the earth; but it is in no way represented in Scripture to be any part, or product, of this mystery age. On the other hand, it is revealed that it will be ushered in by the same divine movements that form the closing scenes of this age. The impelling motive of the service of saints at the present time must be nothing less than the world-wide testimony to the Gospel of God's grace through which Christ may finish the gathering out of a people for His Person and soon complete His bride. The great soul-winners of past generations have been actuated by this vision and purpose, and there could hardly be a ministry in the mind and power of the Spirit that did not wholly agree with the revealed purpose of God in the present mystery age.

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