

THIS PRESENT AGE – PART C

This morning we will begin to look at the pivotal chapter in this segment of our study - [Matthew 13](#) and the teaching of Christ on the “**kingdom of heaven**”. Prior to the death of Christ and the day of Pentecost, God primarily dealt with Israel through **covenants**. Some of the covenants (or promises) were conditional and some were unconditional. Some of them depended on Israel’s obedience and some did not. It is exactly the same with us in the church. Some of the promises of God to us are based on our obedience, and some are not. What is crystal clear is that the Old Testament age closed without some of the unconditional covenants being fulfilled for Israel. Eventually they will all be fulfilled. If God has unconditionally said to Israel “**I will**”, then that promise will be fulfilled. It seems reasonable that for God’s fulfillment of those previous covenants to actually be fulfilled that, two things need to happen. First, Israel needed to become a nation again because it was to the nation of Israel that the promises were made. This happened in 1948. However, secondly, they need to come to a genuine faith in Christ because He was the entire purpose for which the nation was created. That will happen at the Second Coming when “**all Israel will be saved**”. [Romans 11:26](#) says,

Ro 11:26 (NKJV) And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: "The Deliverer will come out of Zion, And He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob;

Once this happens, then all of the promises that God made to Israel will begin to unfold for them.

So, what we will see is that after the death of Christ that God instituted a new “**age**”, a new “**dispensation**”, a new program called the “**church**”. When that happened, God did not void or replace His promises to Israel or His work on their behalf, but He did interrupt when He would fulfill the promises for them. For a period of time, God simply “put Israel on the shelf”. Jesus clearly spoke to His disciples about this “**new covenant**” that He was establishing in His upper room discourse on the night He was betrayed, but it did not become actual until the indwelling of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. In [Acts 15:14](#), during the Jerusalem council, they announced the following,

Ac 15:14 (NKJV) Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name.

The reference here to “**a people**” is a reference to the church itself of which Christ is the head. You are a Gentile, and God has made you one of His “**people**”, so this verse is actually talking about you. Just think of all of the Gentiles in the world which are not a part of God’s people – but you are. You should be eternally grateful for what God has done both for you and in you. The church is the bride and Christ is the bridegroom. He is the Vine and we are the branches. He is the Shepherd and we are the sheep. He is the High Priest and we are the priests.

Now, it is important to understand how Scriptures describes “**this present age**”. Prior to Pentecost, the concept of the “**church**” was not known and was what Scripture calls a “**mystery**”. [Colossians 1:24-27](#) speaks of it this way,

Col 1:24 (NKJV) I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church,²⁵ of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God which was given to me for you, to fulfill the word of God,²⁶ the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now

has been revealed to His saints. ²⁷ **To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.**

So, this new program that was initiated at Pentecost is called a “**mystery**”, and it is referring to what we call the church. The dominating characteristic of the church is that every believer is indwelt by the Spirit of Christ, or “**Christ in you**”. That never happened to an Old Testament saint. When Scripture uses the word “**mystery**”, it is not speaking of something as we perceive a mystery. We watch mystery movies and read mystery books, and we think of a mystery as something puzzling, secretive, and shadowy. However, Scripture uses the word to describe a divine purpose or program of God that was fully known to Him, but not known by others, and the only way that anyone could know of this “**mystery**” was for God to reveal it to them. One author called it a “*sacred secret*”. In the New Testament, the word “**mystery**” is used 27 times, and in each case except one, it is always referring to truth that has been revealed to “**this present age**”. [Ephesians 3:1-7](#), and specifically v5, gives an incredibly clear picture of this mystery when it says,

Eph 3:1 (NKJV) For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles-- ² if indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you, ³ how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, ⁴ by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), ⁵ which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets: ⁶ that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel, ⁷ of which I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me by the effective working of His power.

This entire program of God in which Gentiles would become the body of Christ by faith was a complete mystery to the Jews. Everything about this work of God was a mystery to them. The Incarnation was a mystery. The idea of redemption was a mystery. The Antichrist, or the man of sin, was a mystery. The unveiling of the Tribulation was a mystery. In a sense, we could accurately say that all of the New Testament was a mystery to the Jews.

Now, what we need to understand relative to Israel is twofold: (1) what Israel has done and (2) what will happen to Israel. In my mind, the state of Israel and the state of the church are actually the keys in understanding most end-time events, and especially the time right prior to the rapture and the Second Coming. So, in [Matthew 13](#), we will see these events from the perspective of what God calls the “**kingdom of heaven**”, and what is described there will be greatly enhanced by our understanding of [Revelation 2-3](#). So, when we speak of this mystery form of the “**kingdom of heaven**”, here is what I want you to do. I want you to simply think of it as what primarily happens during the church age in which we live. As we develop these studies, I think it will be clear that [Matthew 13](#) is talking about the **development** of the church. For instance, [Matthew 13:10-11](#) gives us an introduction as to what Christ is going to do in that chapter when His disciples ask Him a particular question,

Mt 13:10 (NKJV) And the disciples came and said to Him, "Why do You speak to them in parables?"

¹¹ He answered and said to them, "Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.

One thing that Jesus clearly says in [Matthew 13](#) is that the “**kingdom of heaven**” in its ultimate fulfillment will not be completed until Israel finally accepts Christ as her King – and that time will be at the Second Coming when He establishes his earthly kingdom for 1000 years. Much of this is clearly prophesied in [Zechariah 12 and 14](#), along with [Romans 9-11](#) which is the specific teaching in the New Testament on the restoration of Israel. For instance, [Romans 11:25-27](#) says,

Ro 11:25 (NKJV) For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. ²⁶ And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: “*The Deliverer will come out of Zion, And He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob;* ²⁷ *For this is My covenant with them, When I take away their sins.*”

So, before we begin to look at the details of [Matthew 13](#), I want to give you three ways in which this chapter has been interpreted, and by which one of the three we will interpret it.

The first approach to interpreting [Matthew 13](#) are those who give this chapter no prophetic significance at all. They see it from a purely spiritual or moral perspective. I.e., what are the spiritual or moral lessons that can be learned from this chapter. Everything is spiritualized. Those who interpret [Matthew 13](#) that way would be called non-dispensationalists and would include both a-millennialists and post-millennialists. I.e., they see the program of God as one program from the fall to the eternal state, and therefore do not see Scripture as having dispensations. They recognize that Scripture speaks of “**ages**”, but they do not accept the obvious distinctions and different characteristics of each age as provided in Scripture. Scripture is seen as one unified “program” rather than unified “dispensations”, or periods and ages. Certainly all of Scripture is unified. No one is going to deny that or argue against that reality. However, that does not in any way preclude or discredit that God worked in a unifying way **through** doing things differently in various dispensations and ages. In my mind, it is almost impossible not to see that reality. Honestly, God can work any way He chooses, and whatever way He chooses will be unified.

The second approach to interpreting [Matthew 13](#) comes from those who recognize the distinctions between Israel and the church, but who say that [Matthew 13](#) is only talking about God’s program for Israel during the Tribulation where God is preparing them for the Second Coming. So, in reality, this approach simply by-passes the church. Once again, it is almost impossible in my mind to see how anyone could take the parables in [Matthew 13](#) and the topic of the “**kingdom of heaven**”, and just relegate them to the Tribulation. I just cringe on the inside when I read someone who takes that position.

The third approach to interpreting [Matthew 13](#) is the one from which we will work. It is the approach that believes that [Matthew 13](#) gives a picture of the conditions on the earth with respect to the **development** of God’s program for His kingdom during the time that Christ is absent from the earth. That period of absence is generally called the **inter-advent period**, or the period between His ascension and His Second Coming. So, [Matthew 13](#) provides various descriptions of that entire period of time which has been almost 2000 years. I.e., what will God’s kingdom actually look like during His absence from the earth?

Now, I want you to keep in mind that the term the “**kingdom of heaven**” is exclusive to Matthew. Matthew presents Jesus Christ as **Israel’s** Messiah – a completely Jewish concept. Mark, for instance,

wrote for the Romans, Luke wrote for the Greeks, but Matthew writes almost exclusively for the Hebrews and uses Hebrew terms and themes. For instance, Christ is referred to as the “**Son of David**” on 10 different occurrences. That is an exclusive Hebrew designation for the Messiah. Matthew refers to the Mosaic law and to Jewish customs more than any of the other gospels. It refers to the Sabbath and to the holy city and the holy place – all Jewish terms, and more than any of the other gospels, it refers distinctly to the fulfillment of prophecy. [Matthew 24-25](#) is a prime example of that.

It is important to remember that when Jesus was giving these parables in [Matthew 13](#) that the church as we know and understand it was still a mystery both to Israel and to His disciples. So, it is not difficult to appreciate why the disciples did not really understand all that Jesus was saying in this chapter. For them, the church was still a mystery. In fact, it was not until [Matthew 16:18-19](#) that Jesus **first** mentions the church to the disciples, and in it Jesus promises to give them “**the keys to the kingdom of heaven**” in v19. These men are the apostles, and Christ is going to give to them the understanding, authority, and power that they will need to establish the church. If the disciples are going to be given the responsibility of taking the message of the church, developing the doctrines of the church, and evangelizing the world with the gospel, it seems critical that they understand the nature of the church. These truths are not something that they could fully understand until Christ had ascended and they were indwelt with the Holy Spirit. All of this will have a great impact on our understanding of the term “**kingdom of heaven**”.

So, the great question that is asked in [Matthew 12:22-23](#) is this,

Mt 12:22 (NKJV) Then one was brought to Him who was demon-possessed, blind and mute; and He healed him, so that the blind and mute man both spoke and saw. ²³ And all the multitudes were amazed and said, "Could this be the Son of David?"

Prior to this question in [Matthew](#), Jesus had said in [Matthew 11:1-9](#) that both He and John the Baptist would be rejected, and the result of that rejection would be judgment. Listen to [Matthew 11:18-24](#),

Mt 11:18 (NKJV) For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' ¹⁹ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' But wisdom is justified by her children." ²⁰ Then He began to rebuke the cities in which most of His mighty works had been done, because they did not repent: ²¹ "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. ²² But I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you. ²³ And you, Capernaum, who are exalted to heaven, will be brought down to Hades; for if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. ²⁴ But I say to you that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you."

Then, in [Matthew 12:24](#), the rejection of Christ comes to a terrible climax where the miracles that Jesus was performing were accredited to Satan,

Mt 12:24 (NKJV) Now when the Pharisees heard *it* they said, "*This fellow does not cast out demons except by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons.*"

You have to appreciate what they had seen. He had performed miracle after miracle after miracle – the most amazing miracles ever seen, and the verdict was that He had performed those miracles through the power of Satan. I.e., they were saying that Jesus was demon possessed. So, in [Matthew 12:31-32](#), Jesus gives a blistering warning of spiritual blindness that was to set in, as well as spiritual judgment that would follow – and all because they had rejected the clear evidence of the Holy Spirit attesting and authenticating the person of Christ. There should never have been any doubt whatsoever.

Mt 12:31 (NKJV) "Therefore I say to you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy *against* the Spirit will not be forgiven men. ³² Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the *age* to come.

So, in [Matthew 12](#) what is happening is that Israel as a nation is rejecting her Messiah and the kingdom that was being offered to them by God. So, the question that arises is “*What will happen to God’s kingdom now that His kingdom has been rejected and the King of that kingdom gone?*”. If God sent the King and the nation of Israel killed the King, then how is the “**kingdom of God**” or the “**kingdom of heaven**” going to develop? **Will** it develop and **how** will it develop? Those are the questions that have to be answered. So, in [Matthew 13](#), what Jesus does is that He identifies what will happen in God’s program for His kingdom, referred to as the “**kingdom of heaven**”, during the period between the rejection of Christ and the return of Christ. He also gives further detail in [Revelation 2-3](#) which is a picture of the church and how it develops.

Now, the word “**kingdom**” is used in different ways in Scripture, and as the word relates to Eschatology there are three different aspects that we need to understand. The first is called the spiritual kingdom, the second is called the millennial kingdom, and the third is called the mystery form of the kingdom.

- (1) The spiritual kingdom includes all of the elect who have experienced a new birth by the power of the Holy Spirit. No one can enter into God’s kingdom apart from the new birth. If you have been saved, then you are a part of that kingdom.
- (2) The millennial kingdom is a literal, earthly kingdom over which Christ will be the king, and He will rule from the throne of David in Jerusalem in fulfillment of the covenant that God made with David. This kingdom was rejected by Israel and therefore its fulfillment postponed. It will come to pass at the Second Coming, and it will include both the church and the nation of Israel.
- (3) The mystery form of the kingdom is an entirely different concept from the two just mentioned. It has never been a mystery that God was going to establish an earthly kingdom, however, the “**mystery**” in the establishment of this kingdom was the fact that the One in whom this kingdom was to be realized would be rejected and so there would be a period of time before His physical, earthly kingdom would be established. So, the mystery form of the kingdom is that time between the first coming and the Second Coming. When we read of the mysteries of the kingdom here in [Matthew 13](#), Scripture is speaking of the conditions that are prevalent during this period between the first coming and the Second Coming. That is why in [Matthew 13:11](#) Jesus refers to what He is about to give a discourse on as “**the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven**”.

Mt 13:11 (NKJV) **He answered and said to them, "Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.**

Now, the millennial kingdom is not a “**mystery**”. Why is that? It is because it was fully revealed in the Old Testament. It does not refer to the spiritual kingdom because that kingdom is only comprised of individuals who have been born again after Pentecost and enter it through the “new birth”. In [Matthew 13](#) it will be clearly seen that this mystery form of the kingdom is composed of saved and unsaved alike, or of what Scripture calls “**wheat and tares, sheep and goats, good fish and bad fish**”. So, this mystery form of the kingdom includes those who are saved and those who are lost within it, and that is a very, very important reality to understand, and especially how it impacts a local church. We will pick up here next week.