

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE COURSE OF THIS PRESENT AGE

We will trace the course of this age through two passages of scripture Matthew 13 and Revelation 2&3. The first from the viewpoint of God's kingdom program, The "Kingdom of Heaven" being that work which Christ is doing from Heaven during this inter-advent period, and includes the Church program as well as the program for Israel during these parrell programs.

There are three points of view concerning Matt. 13. In Matt.13:11 Jesus declares that it is for the disciples to know the mysteries.

(Mat 13:11 NNAS)

Jesus answered them, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted.

To those whom God chose He revealed the mysteries, to others the mystery remained hidden because He spoke in parables. Most certainly this passage deals with the mystery of the kingdom of heaven. The Kingdom of God as promised to Israel was not a mystery but the making of a heavenly kingdom was a mystery. At this point men misinterpret and miss-understand and confusion sets in. The first point of view holds that there is no prophetic significance to this passage. They study this passage only for its spiritual or moral lessons as it affects believers today. They fail to make any distinction between God's program for Israel and God's program for the Church. This is the non-dispensational approach of postmillennialism and amillennialism.

The second point of view recognizes a distinction between Israel and the Church, but hold that this portion is totally limited to God's program for Israel and relegate it to Israel in the tribulation period when God is preparing them for the coming King. This is the ultra-dispensational approach.

Matthew, of all the gospel accounts, is most closely associated with the Hebrew mind and Scriptures. Chapter 13 of Matthew follows the rejection of the Messiah and the Kingdom by Israel. This occurred when the leadership of Israel attributed the work of the Holy Spirit in the ministry of Jesus to Satan. Now that Israel has rejected the offered Kingdom, the question naturally arises, What will happen to God's kingdom program? Since this kingdom was the subject of an irrevocable covenant it is unthinkable that it could be abandoned. Matthew 13 gives the events in the development of the kingdom program from the time of its rejection until it is received, when the nation welcomes the King at His second advent.

The term "Kingdom of Heaven" describes the conditions that will prevail on the earth in that interim while the king is absent. These mysteries relate this present age to the eternal purpose of God in regard to His kingdom. This mystery form of the kingdom is composed of saved and unsaved alike. We must understand this mystery form of the kingdom has reference to things that were hitherto unrevealed, it is definitely limited as to time, and represents the entire sphere of profession in the present age.

Ryrie writes to show that the parables in Matthew 13 are limited to the inter-advent period. He says:

"The kingdom of the heaven has become like unto." This sets the time limit for the beginning of the subject matter involved. In other words, the kingdom of heaven was assuming the form described in the parables at that time when Christ was personally ministering on the earth. The end of the time period covered by these parables is indicated by the phrase "end of the world" or more literally "the

consummation of the age" (verses 39-49). This is the time of the Second Advent of Christ when He shall come in power and great glory. Therefore, it is clear that these parables are concerned only with that time between the days when Christ spoke them on earth and the end of this age. This gives a clue to the meaning of the phrase "the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven."

THE INTERPRETATION OF MATTHEW 13

There are several keys to be used in the interpretation of this passage which will keep one from error:

1. First of all, some of the parables are interpreted by the Lord Himself. Any interpretation of the whole must, of necessity, be in harmony with that which has been interpreted.
2. A second important key is to observe that, while many of the parables are in figurative language, these figures are familiar ones throughout the Word and, therefore will have the same usage here as used consistently elsewhere.

Graham Scroggie, in *Prophecy and History* lends great aid in understanding these Scriptures. He writes:

It appears to me that the key to the interpretation of these parables is in verse 52 of this chapter: (Mat 13:52 NNAS) And Jesus said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like a head of a household, who brings out of his treasure things new and old." These words are spoken of the things which precede, and surly speak of the parables as some *new* and some *old*. But which are *old* and which are *new*? In verse 1 we read that our Lord "went out of the house, and sat by the seaside" and taught; and in verse 36 "then Jesus sent the multitudes away, and went into the house" and taught. Thus the parables are divided into four spoken in public, and three spoken in private; and the evidence goes to show that the first four are the *new treasures of truth*, and the last three are *the old*--that is, truths revealed before. Assuming this, the present Age is presented to our view in a series of seven progressive pictures, describing the course of the kingdom in mystery.

THE NEW THINGS

1. The Seed and the Soils: *The Proclamation of the Kingdom.*
2. The Wheat and the tares: *False Imitation in the Kingdom.*
3. The Mustard Tree: *Wide Visible Extension of the Kingdom.*
4. The Leaven in the Meal: *Insidious Corruption of the Kingdom.*

THE OLD THINGS

5. The Treasure: *The Israelitish Nation.*
6. The Pearl: *The Jewish Remnant During the Tribulation.*
7. The Drag-net: *The Judgment of the Nations at the end of the Tribulation.*

It is not possible or necessary to give a detailed exposition of these parables at this point. We will simply trace the Lord's revelation concerning the course of this present age.

The Sower and the Soils

(Mat 13:3-9 NNAS)

And He spoke many things to them in parables, saying, "Behold, the sower went out to sow; {4} and as he sowed, some *seeds* fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate them up. {5} "Others fell on the rocky places, where they did not have much soil; and immediately they sprang up, because they had no depth of soil. {6} "But when the sun had risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. {7} "Others fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked them out. {8} "And others fell on the good soil and yielded^a a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty. {9} "He who has ears, let him hear."

(Mat 13:18-23 NNAS)

"Hear then the parable of the sower. {19} "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 the one on whom seed was sown beside the road. {20} "The one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; {21} yet he has no *firm* root in himself, but is *only* temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away. {22} "And the one on whom seed was sown among the thorns, this is the man who hears the word, and the worry of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. {23} "And the one on whom seed was sown on the good soil, this is the man who hears the word and understands it; who indeed bears fruit and brings forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty."

Note these facts given in the interpretation by our Lord:

1. This age is one that is characterized by the sowing of seed, which in the parallel portion in Mark 4:14, is shown to be the Word.
2. Within the age there is a marked difference in the preparation of the soils for the reception of the seed sown.
3. The age is marked by opposition to the Word from the world, the flesh and the devil.
4. During the course of the age there will be a decreasing response to the sowing of the seed, from "a hundredfold" to "sixty" to "thirty".

Mark 4:13 reveals that this parable, with the revelation of the program which it makes, is basic to the understanding of the other parables in the discourse. The remaining parables deal with the development of the seed-sowing program.

(Mark 4:13 NNAS)

And He said^a to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How will you understand all the parables?"

THE WHEAT AND THE TARES

(Mat 13:24-30 NNAS)

Jesus presented another parable to them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field. {25} "But while his men

were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went away. {26} "But when the wheat sprouted and bore grain, then the tares became evident also. {27} "The slaves of the landowner came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?' {28} "And he said to them, 'An enemy has done this!' The slaves said^ to him, 'Do you want us, then, to go and gather them up?' {29} "But he said^, 'No; for while you are gathering up the tares, you may uproot the wheat with them. {30} 'Allow both to grow together until the harvest; and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, "First gather up the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn.'" "

(Mat 13:36-43 NNAS)

Then He left the crowds and went into the house. And His disciples came to Him and said, "Explain to us the parable of the tares of the field." {37} And He said, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man, {38} and the field is the world; and *as for* the good seed, these are the sons of the kingdom; and the tares are the sons of the evil *one*; {39} and the enemy who sowed them is the devil, and the harvest is the end of the age; and the reapers are angels. {40} "So just as the tares are gathered up and burned with fire, so shall it be at the end of the age. {41} "The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, {42} and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. {43} "Then THE RIGHTEOUS WILL SHINE FORTH AS THE SUN in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.

Note!

1. The true sowing, mentioned in the first parable, is to be imitated by a false sowing.
2. There is to be a side-by-side development of that which is good with that which is evil as the result of the two showings.
3. There will be a Divine separation performed by the angels of God. The false will be separated from the true. The true will be gathered unto the Father. The false condemned to Judgment.
4. The essential character of that which was sown can only be determined by the fruit the seed produces. The evidence of the receiving of the Word of God is a changed life.

THE MUSTARD SEED

(Mat 13:31-32 NNAS)

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; {32} 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."

Note!

1. The age is characterized by an abnormal external growth. That which was to be an herb has become a tree -- it has developed into a monstrosity.

2. This monstrosity has become the resting place for birds. In the first parable the birds represented that which was antagonistic to the program of God and consistency would demand that they be so interpreted here. Here it is seen that the Lord is teaching that, whereas the opposition at one time was from without, it now has entered into the program itself and is working from within. The parable teaches that the enlarged sphere of profession has become inwardly corrupt.

THE LEAVEN HIDDEN IN THE MEAL

(Mat 13:33 NNAS)

He spoke another parable to them, "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three pecks of flour until it was all leavened."

Note!

1. Yeast or Leaven is used symbolically in Scripture as pervasive evil.
2. The flower or meal was used in the Old Testament in connection with the sweet-savour offerings and was typical of the person of Christ. This parable speaks of the introduction of false and evil teachings into the very teachings about Jesus Christ.

THE HID TREASURE

(Mat 13:44 NNAS)

"The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid *again*; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

Note!

The purpose of this parable is to depict the relationship of Israel to this present age. Although set aside by God until the age is completed, yet Israel is not forgotten .

1. The Lord Jesus Christ is purchasing a treasure. This purchase was effected at the cross.
2. This treasure is hidden away in a field, unseen by men, but known to the purchaser.
3. During the age the purchaser does not come into the possession of His purchased treasure, but only into the possession of the place in which the treasure resides. The parable is showing that Christ has laid the foundation for Israel's acceptance in this age, even though the age ends without His having appropriated His treasure. The treasure will be unearthed when He comes to establish His kingdom.

THE PEARL

(Mat 13:45-46 NNAS)

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls, {46} and upon finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

Note! This parable pictures the Church. There are some who also see a picture of Israel.

1. The pearl is sought by the merchantman.
2. The pearl is purchased by the merchantman (Christ).
3. The pearl becomes the merchantman's adornment.

THE DRAGNET

(Mat 13:47-50 NNAS)

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet cast into the sea, and gathering *fish* of every kind; {48} and when it was filled, they drew it up on the beach; and they sat down and gathered the good *fish* into containers, but the bad they threw away. {49} "So it will be at the end of the age; the angels will come forth and take out the wicked from among the righteous, {50} and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Note!

The Age will end in judgment.. This is not the Great White Throne judgment but as stated in (Mat 25:32 NNAS) "All the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats;

Schofield writes, "This judgment is to be distinguished from the judgment of the great white throne. Here there is no resurrection; the persons judged are living nations, no books are opened; three classes are present, sheep, goats, brethren; the time is at the return of Christ (v. 31); and the scene is on earth. All these particulars are in contrast with Rev. 20:11-15. The test in this judgment is the treatment accorded by the nations to those whom Christ calls "my brethren." At the end of this age, at that time when Christ returns to this earth there will be a sorting out of the nations according to how they have treated God's chosen people. God promised Abraham "I will bless them that bless you and curse them that curseth you" (Gen 12:3 NNAS) And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed." As God prepares to fulfill His covenant promises to Israel He pronounces judgment upon the nations of this world according as to how they have treated Israel. Those wicked nations who have opposed God's purpose in choosing Israel will be destroyed and will not be a part of God's Kingdom but those nations who have sheltered, protected and fed Israel will enjoy God's blessing in the Kingdom Age.

We may summarize the teaching as to the course of the age by saying:

1. There will be a sowing of the Word throughout the age.
2. There will be an imitation by a false counter sowing.
3. The Kingdom will assume huge outer proportions.
4. The Kingdom will be marked by inner doctrinal corruption.
5. God preserves and keep his treasurer Israel.
6. God will also call out a treasurer from the nations, His body the Church.
7. The age will end in judgment of the nations.

This pattern is presented in a number of other parallels in scripture. It is important that you understand the pattern of this inter-advent period, to give you a structure to support the prophecies of the Word of God.

LETTERS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES

The course of this present age is presented in a second major passage found in Revelation Ch. 2&3. Whereas Matthew 13 surveyed this present age in relation to the "Kingdom of Heaven" (which is the realm in which God is working to accomplish His purpose in these last days), Revelation 2&3 outline the present age in reference to the church.

The Time Period of Revelation

John, in the book of Revelation, is writing concerning things that were past, things that are present, and things that are to come. (Rev. 1:19) Walter Scott, in *Exposition of the Revelation*, writes:

The great divisions of the book are here written for the instruction of the Church of God.

"What thou hast seen" refers to the vision of Christ just beheld (verses 12-16). "The things that are" refer to the several successive, broadly-defined features of the professing Church and of Christ's relation thereto, till its final rejection, not yet accomplished (Chaps. 2 and 3). "The things that are about to be after these things." In this third division, the world and the Jews, and, we may add, the corrupt and apostate church, *i.e.*, that which is to be "spued out," are embraced in this strictly prophetic part of the Apocalypse (ch 4-22:5).

Nothing has more contributed to throw discredit on prophetic studies, than the erroneous principle on which it has been sought to interpret this book. Here is the key for its interpretation hanging at the door; take it down, use it, and enter in.

There is simplicity and consistency in apportioning the main contents of the book to *a past, a present, and a future*.

It would seem evident, then, that John, in writing to the seven churches, is depicting this present age from the inception of the church to the judgment of the apostate church prior to the second advent. Thus the period of time covered by these chapters would essentially parallel the period covered by Matthew 13.

The Purpose of the Seven Letters

John is writing to seven local congregations in order to meet the needs of these individual assemblies. Pember says: "There can be no doubt that these letters were primarily intended for the communities to which they are inscribed, and deal with actual circumstances of the time." There would be then a direct historical application of what is here recorded to each of the seven churches.

These seven letters represent the conditions that could be found throughout the Christian community at any specific point in time. Joseph Seiss, *Lectures on the Apocalypse*, writes, . . . "The seven Churches represent seven vanities of Christians, both true and false. Every professor of Christianity is either an Ephesian in his religious qualities, a Smyrnaote, a Pergamite, a Thyatirian, a Sardian, a Philadelphian, or a Laodicean. It is of these seven sorts that the whole church is made up . . . every community of Christian professors has some of all the varied classes which make up Christendom at large . . .

I thus find the seven Churches in every Church, giving to those Epistles a directness of application to ourselves, and to professing Christians of every age, of the utmost solemnity and importance.

Pember says:

. . . "When taken together, they exhibit every phase of Christian society which would ever be found in the various parts of Christendom, and so enabled the Lord to give comfort, advice, exhortation, warning, and threatening, from which something could be found to suit any possible circumstance of His people till the end of the age."

There is a prophetic revelation as to the course of the church age in the letters. Pember states: "In the order in which they were given, they foreshadowed the successive predominant phases through which the nominal Church was to pass, from the time when John saw the vision until the Lord comes." Walter Scott, *Exposition of the Revelation*, writes:

Ecclesiastical pretension and departure from first love characterized the close of the apostolic-period -- *Ephesus* (2:1-7). Next succeeded the martyr-period, which brings us down to the close of the tenth and last persecution, under Diocletian -- *Smyrna* (2:8-11) Decreasing spirituality and increasing worldliness went hand in hand from the accession of Constantine and his public patronage of Christianity on to the seventh century -- *Pergamos* (2:12-17). The papal church, which is Satan's masterpiece on earth, is witnessed in the assumption of universal authority and cruel persecution of the saints of God. Its evil reign covers "the middle ages," the moral characteristics of which have been well termed "dark." Popery blights everything it touches -- *Thyatira* (2:18-29). The Reformation was God's intervention in grace and power to cripple papal authority and introduce into Europe the light which for 300 years has been burning with more or less brilliancy. Protestantism with its divisions and deadness shows clearly enough how far short it comes of God's ideal of the Church and Christianity -- *Sardis* (3:1-6). Another Reformation, equally the work of God characterized the beginning of the last Century -- *Philadelphia* (3:7-13). [This reference is to the time of the great revivals and the growth from that of the world-wide missionary effort.] The present general state of the professing Church which is one of lukewarmness is the most hateful and nauseous of any yet described. We may well term the last phase of church-history on the eve of judgment, the Christless period -- *Laodicea* (3:14-22). [Christ states "Behold I stand at the door and knock" Jesus himself indicates that he is outside the Christless church]

Note that the history of the first three churches is consecutive; whereas the

history of the remaining four overlaps, and then practically runs concurrently to the end -- the Coming of the Lord.

While these seven epochs are seen to be successive, it is important to observe that the succeeding epoch does not terminate the preceding one. Pember well observes:

The number of parables [in Matthew 13] and of epistles is seven, that number being significant of dispensational completeness; and, in each of the two prophecies, we apparently have set before us seven successive phases or characteristic epochs ... which embrace the whole ... These epochs commence in the order in which they are given; but any of them may overlap that which succeeds it, or even extend its influence, in a greater or less degree, to the end of the age.

The parallelism between Matthew thirteen and Revelation two and three

While the mystery form of the kingdom is not synonymous with the visible church, yet, since the time period is essentially the same in the two passages, we may reasonably expect that there would be a parallelism of development. The following chart will illustrate this general parallelism.

Matt. 13	Rev. 2-3	Meaning of the name	Approximate dates	Characteristic
Sower	Ephesus	Desired	Pentecost to 100 A.D.	Time of sowing, organization, and evangelism
Wheat and Tares	Smyrna	Myrrh	Nero to 300 A.D.	Persecution Enemy revealed
Mustard seed	Pergamos	Thoroughly Married	300 to 800 A.D.	Worldly alliance. Great external growth
Leaven	Thyatira	continual sacrifice	800 to 1517	Papal domination. Doctrinal corruption Empty profession Rise of the state church.
Treasure Hid	Sardis	Those escaping	Reformation	
Pearl	Philadelphia	Brotherly love	The last days	True Church of the last days

Dragnet

Laodicea

People
ruling

Last days

Apostasy

It is not intended to infer that there is an identity in the revelation in the two passages, rather, that there is a similarity in the progress of the course of the age as revealed in the two portions.

The Close of the Present Age

Within this present age between the two advents of Christ, God is bringing to fulfillment two distinct programs: that with the church, which will be completed at the rapture of the church, and that with Israel, which will be completed after the rapture at the second advent of Christ. Both of these have descriptive passages concerning the end times of their respective programs. There is reference to the "last times" for the church (1 Pet. 1:20 and Jude 18) and to the "last time" for the church (1 Pet. 1:5 and 1 John 2:18). There is reference to the "latter days" for Israel (Dan. 10:14; Deut. 4:30) and for the church (1 Tim. 4:1). Scripture refers to the "last days" for Israel (Isa. 2:2; Micah 4:1; Acts 2:17) and also for the church (2 Tim. 3:1; Heb. 1:2). There is also a reference to the "last day" for Israel (John 6:39, 40, 44, 54), although this usage of "day" may refer to a program rather than to a time period. In these observations it is important to observe that the references to any given time period must be related to the program of which it is a part. When used in reference to Israel's program it can not refer to the program for the church.

In this present consideration attention is not directed to the events concerning the close of the age in reference to Israel. This will be considered later and will include all those prophecies which take place after the translation of the church preceding the second advent of Christ. Attention is directed to the events connected with the close of the age in relation to God's program for the church.

Concerning the last days for the church Chafer writes:

A very extensive body of Scripture bears on the last days for the Church. Reference is to a restricted time at the very end of, and yet wholly within, the present age. Though this brief period immediately precedes the great tribulation and in some measure is a preparation for it, these two times of apostasy and confusion -- though incomparable in history -- are wholly separate the one from the other. Those Scriptures which set forth the last days for the church give no consideration to political or world conditions but are confined to the Church itself. These Scriptures picture men as departing from the faith (1 Tim. 4:1-2). There will be a manifestation of characteristics which belong to unregenerate men, though it is under the profession of "a form of godliness" (cf. 2 Tim 4:2-4), the leaders in these forms of "righteousness" will be unregenerate men from whom nothing more spiritual than this could proceed (cf. 1 Cor. 2:14). The following is a partial list of the passages which present the truth respecting the last days of the Church: 1 Timothy 4:1-3; 2 Timothy 3:1-5; 4:3-4; James 5:1-8; 2 Peter 2:1-22; 3:3-6; Jude 1:1-25.

Since the church is given the hope of an imminent return of Christ there can be no signs given her as to when this event will take place. The believer is to live in such a manner as to be ready at any moment to be ush-

ered into the presence of Christ Himself. My parents placed a plaque, in the room occupied by we three boys at home, which read, "Do nothing that you would not like to be doing when Jesus comes. Say nothing you would not like to be saying when Jesus comes. Go to no place in which you would not like to be found when Jesus Comes." This illustrates the watchword for believers, "always ready." Therefore we pass by the subject of "signs of the times" in reference to the closing days for the church. However, from the Scriptures cited above, there are certain revelations concerning conditions within the professing church at the end of the age. These conditions center around a system of denials.

1. There is a denial of God (Luke 17:26; 2 Tim. 3:4-5)
2. There is a denial of Christ (1 John 2:18; 1 John 4:3; 2 Pet. 2:6)
3. There is a denial of Christ's return (2 Pet. 3:3-4)
4. There is a denial of the faith (1 Tim. 4:1-2; Jude 3)
5. There is a denial of sound doctrine (2 Tim. 4:3-4)
6. There is a denial of the separated life (2 Tim. 3:1-7)
7. There is a denial of Christian liberty (1 Tim 4:3-4)
8. There is a denial of morals (2 Tim. 3:1-18, 13; Jude 18)
9. There is a denial of authority (2 Tim. 3:4)

This condition at the close of the age is seen to coincide with the state within the Laodicean Church, before which Christ must stand to seek admission. In view of its close it is not surprising that the age is called an "evil age" in Scripture.