

Chapter XII

The Flesh and the Spirit in the Church Age

THE PARABLE OF THE MUSTARD SEED

The third parable spoken by our Lord in the thirteenth chapter of Matthew was the parable of a grain of mustard seed. He told the multitude who were gathered to hear Him: *The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field: which indeed is the least of all seeds: but when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof* (Matthew 13:31-32).

This parable, as well as all of the parables in the thirteenth chapter of the book of Matthew, is concerned with the kingdom of heaven, which is the realm of the truth. The realm of the truth was once under the custodianship of Israel; but with her apostasy and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., the realm of the truth is presently under the custodianship of the New Testament Church. Thus, as we consider each of the parables in the thirteenth chapter of Matthew, we shall see a progressive revelation of the realm of the truth between the sixty-ninth and seventieth weeks

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of Daniel's prophecy (Daniel 9:24-27).

The seventy weeks of Daniel are concerned with Daniel's people and Daniel's city, the Jews and Jerusalem (Daniel 9:24); but even though it could not be seen when the prophecy of the seventy weeks was given to Daniel, there is a gap between the sixty-ninth week and the seventieth week of the prophecy. Christ was to be crucified (*cut off*) at the end of the sixty-ninth week according to the prophecy, and the seventieth week will not begin until the prince from the fourth world empire makes a covenant with Israel for one week (Daniel 9:24-27; Revelation 17:8-11). This gap (of nearly two-thousand years to date) between the sixty-ninth week and the seventieth week provides us with an overview of the present church age.

In keeping with this, our Lord said to Israel, *Behold, your house is left unto you desolate*. He also said to those believers who would be used of the Lord to start this church age, *Upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it* (Matthew 16:18). Thus, ten days after our Lord's ascension into heaven (on the day of Pentecost), the Lord empowered His church to be the custodian of the truth until the main harvest of the first resurrection, when the church age will end. Consequently the realm of the truth in the age between our Lord's ascension and His coming in the air is found in the church and not in Israel; but, with the rapture of the church, Israel (in the one hundred and forty-four thousand witnesses) will become the custodian of the truth again during the seventieth week of Daniel.

With this in mind, as we consider the mustard seed, we must compare it with the other seed sown by the sower and by His enemy. The wheat, by our Lord's interpretation of the second parable, was the word of the kingdom, which is the proclamation of the Word of God in the

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gospel. This makes the tares sown by the enemy *another gospel*. The sower and the enemy both sowed a considerable amount of seed in the field, but in contrast to this, the sower planted a single seed of mustard. This seed then grew into a tree. This means it grew far beyond its cultivatable size, which becomes the point of the parable. It grew so large it became a habitation for birds, which were interpreted by our Lord in His first parable to be the devil.

In this age we use mustard for a condiment or as a spice; however, in time past (in the age in which the parable was spoken), mustard had several medicinal uses. It was used as a diuretic, an emetic, and as a counterirritant. It would seem, because of these medicinal values, the mustard was planted for the spiritual healing of those who are dead in trespasses and in sin. This is the role of the church. Comparing the church with the Word of God, which it is to preach, the church certainly has a subordinate role to the Living Word and the written Word of God. Consequently our Lord was not making a reference to the physical size of the mustard seed when He said it was *the least of all seeds*, but to the fact that the mustard seed was of less importance than the other seed sown by the sower.

The reason there was but one grain of mustard planted is that all genuine believers are a part of the singular body of Christ, which is called the church: His called-out assembly. Even so there are many churches of many denominations, but all of the true believers in those churches are a part of the one true church, which is the body of Christ. Multiple churches are addressed in the second and third chapters of the book of the Revelation; there are seven letters to seven churches. Yet in the twenty-first chapter of the Revelation there is an invitation of the angel to the apostle John to *Come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb's wife*. John was then able to see the

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new Jerusalem descending out of heaven from God. The description of the city reveals that everyone in the Lamb's book of life is a resident of that city. Thus, the called-out assembly of our Lord Jesus Christ, which we call the church, is the bride of Christ, which are the redeemed of all ages and of all nations, both Jews and Gentiles, and not just those who are redeemed in what we call the present church age.

The Scriptures teach us that our Lord Jesus Christ is the living Word which came down from heaven: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.... And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth* (John 1:1-3 & 14).

Further, our Lord said, *Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my Word shall never pass away.* Thus our Lord Jesus Christ is the living Word; and in the interpretation of the parable of the tares and wheat, we have seen that the sowing of the wheat seed represents the preaching of the Word of God: which declares the living Word. Later in the same gospel, our Lord said: *Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit* (John 12:24).

As a result of the death, burial and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the proclamation of this in the gospel, God has brought forth a crop of *children of God* in the kingdom of God. These children of God, assembled together for the furtherance of the gospel, make up the church of God: the singular mustard plant. All who are a part of that plant are to have the

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attitude of John the Baptist, *He must increase, but I must decrease* (John 3:30). Therefore the mustard seed is indeed less than the other seed sown by the sower.

Despite the fact that the church in Jerusalem started out well and maintained its subordinate role to the Lord Jesus Christ and the message He gave it to preach, it had its problems with the legalistic *other gospel* of the Judaizers. Then, with the expansion of the gospel into the Gentile nations of the world by the ministry of Paul and Barnabas, almost immediately there was a corruption of the churches by the *other gospel* of the Judaizers. Paul fought this *other gospel* in all of the churches he had established, counteracting *a way which seemeth right unto a man* with the truth of the Word of God. Nevertheless the devil's lie had its effect.

This brings us to the unchecked growth of the mustard plant, which manifested itself primarily in Rome, the capital city of the Roman world. Emperor Constantine professed to be a believer in Jesus Christ. He also professed to have seen a vision of a cross in the air, with the command, *By this sign conquer*. As the Roman legions went forth into the world, they did not preach the gospel, but forced the conquered into streams and lakes, under threat of death, to become, by this so-called baptism, Christians. Thus with the political and religious expansion of Rome, the mustard plant became like a tree, which provided a place for the devil to lodge in its uppermost branches, or under the shade of it.

The church, which had been planted for the healing of the nations, had become (in its several parts) a place for Satan's ministers to operate. Consequently, from most of the so-called churches of Jesus Christ, we find the devil's ministers spewing forth *another gospel*. The whole system has the approval of the world, because it preaches a message which agrees with the way

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the world thinks. As the mustard plant gets larger and larger, the larger it gets, the more approval it gains from the world, and the more apostate it becomes towards God.

In previous studies, we have learned that man looks on the outward appearance, but God looks on the heart. Consequently the unchecked growth of the mustard plant has the approval of man. It has his approval because it gives him something of which he can boast. It gives man a message that agrees with his natural mind. It gives man a sense of superiority and pride because it is big. And it gives man a sense of importance because his church is recognized throughout the world. Thus the devil continues his seduction of the human family by providing them with exactly what they want.