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Destiny and Value of the Kingdom (Part 1)



The Life and Teachings of Christ - Steve Gregg

In this talk, Steve Gregg explores the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven in Matthew 13. While on the surface, these parables may seem to imply the success and growth of the kingdom of God, Gregg draws attention to the presence of birds and leaven, which can represent evil and corruption. He argues that the small beginning of the mustard seed and the transformative power of the leaven point to the profound uplifting effect that King Jesus can have on society. Rather than relying on political or sociological means, Gregg believes that the Church can be a blessing to society by spreading the message of the kingdom.

Transcript

Okay, we'll turn now to Matthew chapter 13 and verses 30, what? 33 through 35? No, before that. 31 through 33. 31 through 33.

That's just three verses. And another parable he put forth to them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is like a 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 greater than all herbs, and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches. Another parable he spoke to them.

The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal, till it was all leaven. Now, these two parables are similar to each other, in that they both speak of something that is small initially, but grows or exerts an influence disproportionate to its size or disproportionate to its initial beginnings, and therefore the kingdom of heaven is said to be something that is not starting with a bang. It's not something that's beginning as a huge enterprise, but rather small, like a mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds, and growing into something great.

Now, of course, at the time Jesus spoke this, there wasn't an awful lot to show for the kingdom, but today, two thousand years later, we look around and the kingdom of God has indeed spread worldwide, and is continuing to do so, and is spreading rapidly, more rapidly than ever before in some parts of the world right now. Now, there are a number

of difficulties that arise in this. The principal one is over its interpretation.

Now, to tell you the truth, most of us, probably, if we had no exposure to anybody's interpretation and simply read this verse, would immediately assume that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that grows large after small beginnings, and that the kingdom of God is like leaven, which gets put into a lump and causes the lump to rise. Now, why would we deduce this? Well, because that's what it says. That's all it says.

It doesn't say anything else, and therefore, you might think there's no difficulty whatsoever in its interpretation, but in fact there is, not because there's anything difficult about understanding the parables, but because a predominant interpretation that is popular today takes these parables, turns them on their heads, and makes them as if they say the opposite, in fact, of what they say. That interpretation, not surprisingly, is that of the dispensationalists, and I want to acquaint you with what it is that the dispensationalists do with these parables. Now, on the surface, it would look as if these parables speak of the enormous success and powerful influence for good in the world that the kingdom of God will have, but the dispensational view is that the church, which is the form in which the kingdom is presently manifest, is not going to prosper, is not going to do well.

In the end, it's going to be corrupted. In fact, that is the purpose of the rapture, to get the church out of the way, apparently. At least one of the purposes of the rapture would be to get the failed church out of the world so that the successful Israelites can take over, and the Jews then can finish the work of God more successfully than the church was able to.

It is the belief of dispensationalism that the church in the last days will be corrupt, and these parables are forced into service to prove this point. Now, how is this done? I wouldn't bother with this because, to my mind, it is an interpretation unworthy of notice, except for the fact that so many people hold it and teach it, and you'll find many commentators, because of their dispensational slant, will teach that these parables mean that the kingdom of God is going to be corrupted. In the first parable of the mustard seed, they argue in this way.

The kingdom is like a mustard seed. It grows into a great plant, and the birds of the air lodge in its branches, verse 32 says. Now, here's the argument.

In the first parable in this chapter, Matthew 13, begins with the parable of the sower. There were birds in that parable. Some seed fell on the wayside, and the birds of the air came and gobbled them up.

When Jesus gave the interpretation of that parable, he said that the birds represented the devil. He didn't say it quite in those words, but he said, these are they that fall by the wayside. They are the ones who hear the word of God, the kingdom, but do not

understand it, and the wicked one comes and snatches it away, obviously corresponding to the action of the birds eating the seeds.

So what the devil does, the birds do in that parable, and it is argued that we must recognize an exegetical rule or a hermeneutical rule. Those words, I hope, are not unfamiliar to you. Hermeneutics is the science of interpretation, and exegetical means reading out of the passage what's there.

It's a word related to biblical studies. There is an exegetical rule, some have told us, mostly dispensationists, called the law of exegetical constancy. The rule basically stated simply is this, that if a symbol is employed in one place to represent a thing, then it should be thought to be constant.

So that if birds represent the devil in one parable, then if birds also appear in a later parable, they must also represent the devil, or at least they must represent something in character like the devil. They must represent evil. Certainly the birds were evil in the case of the parable of the sower, and therefore they must be evil in the case of the parable of the mustard seed, which grows into a great tree and the birds lodge in its branches.

Therefore, they say on the basis of this argument, that the parable is predicting a time when once the church has grown large, it will be infiltrated by evil, and in its final days it will be shot through with corruption. And the birds lodging in the branches are that which points to this, that the wicked have infiltrated and permeated the church with a wicked influence and corruption, so that the church in the last days before the rapture will be in fact a corrupt church. The argument from the parable of the leaven goes similarly.

Again, the law of exegetical constancy is employed. Leaven in the Bible frequently is a way of talking about sin. Jesus talked about the leaven of the scribes and Pharisees.

He said, beware of the leaven of the scribes and Pharisees. In one place, he said that leaven was their hypocrisy. In another place, he said that leaven of the scribes and Pharisees was their doctrines.

But we do have in Paul, in 1 Corinthians 5, a statement about the feast of unleavened bread. In 1 Corinthians 5, he says that Christ, our Passover, has been sacrificed for us. He says, therefore, let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

Now, Paul is obviously making an application to the Jewish feast of unleavened bread, which followed the day of Passover. So he says, Christ is our Passover, and our life forever following our redemption is like keeping the feast of unleavened bread. And the unleavened bread represents sincerity and truth.

Leaven, therefore, represents malice and wickedness. Now, having observed all these

things, the dispensationalist tells us, since leaven is evil in 1 Corinthians 5 and in the places where Jesus talked about the leaven of the scribes and Pharisees, it must necessarily be evil here as well, because we have the law of exegetical constancy. Therefore, rather than the parable of the leaven in the lump, really speaking of the success and dramatic impact that the kingdom of God has on the world, it really talks about the infiltration, again, of evil into the kingdom of God.

That the leaven represents sin coming into the lump of dough, which is the kingdom, and that both parables speak of the perversion, the corruption, the degeneration of the church in the future. The point is that both of these parables, which on the surface seem to say the kingdom of God will be enormously successful, are actually made to say the church is going to be corrupt. Now, let's examine these arguments for a moment.

Frankly, I don't think they have any merit at all, and I wouldn't waste time on them if you weren't likely to encounter them, and you will if you sit under dispensational teaching. And that's kind of hard to avoid in the world today. Let's talk about, first of all, the whole concept of a law of exegetical constancy.

Is there such a law? Well, I would say, first of all, the Bible nowhere says there is such a law. There's no such rule described in Scripture. Nowhere does Jesus or Paul or James or Peter say, now listen, if a symbol means something in one place, the same symbol cannot be used to mean something else somewhere else.

It has to always mean the same thing. Now, common sense would tell us that the law is invalid. We have already studied several parables.

We've studied the parable of the sower. We've studied the parable of the wheat and the tares. We've studied another parable in Mark 4 about the growing seed that grows while the farmer sleeps.

And now even we have a seed parable. It's not about a field, but it's about a mustard seed. Now, all four of these parables, the ones we've encountered so far, have seeds in them.

But interestingly, in the parable of the sower, we are told that the seed is the word of God. Or sometimes the word of the kingdom. Or simply the word, depending on which gospel parallel we're reading.

But the seed in the first parable is the word of God. In the parable of the growing seed that grows while the farmer is asleep, he said the kingdom of God is the seed itself. The kingdom grows.

In the parable of the wheat and the tares, the good seed are the children of the kingdom. And the tares are the children of the wicked one. This is stated in unmistakable terms.

Now, here we have three successive parables, all of them employing seeds. In all likelihood, wheat is the intended kind of seed in all three of those first parables. And yet, the seed doesn't mean the same thing in any two of them.

In one case, the seed is the word of God. In another case, the seed is the kingdom of God. In another case, the seeds, good seeds, are the children of the kingdom.

Obviously, we cannot employ a law of exegetical constancy with these parables. Because we would require in such a case for the seed to always represent the same thing. Furthermore, there are excellent reasons for rejecting this application of this alleged law to the parables under consideration.

For one thing, birds in reference to seeds are a nuisance. When a sower sows seeds and birds come along, the birds are there as a threat to the sowing of the seeds, to the growing of the seeds, I should say. The birds eat the seeds and that's all she wrote.

There's no growth, no fruit. And therefore, the birds thwart the purpose of the farmer when that is the imagery. But with the image of a tree and birds nesting in the branches, there's no way that it can be argued that birds in the branches are a nuisance to the tree.

It could even be argued that that's what the tree is there for, to provide shelter for the wild animals and birds and so forth. I mean, we're not told that it's a, well, that's a mustard tree, but all trees, of course, could be used to shelter birds. And the presence of birds in the branches in no way affects the tree negatively, unless they're woodpeckers or something.

But that's not implied in the parable at all. There is nothing sinister about the presence of birds in a tree. Now, if you were a seed laying on top of hardened ground and birds came along, there is definitely something very threatening, very menacing about the birds in that imagery.

But in an entirely different parable, entirely different situation, the birds do not function as a danger or a negative influence in any sense. Now, I would like to also point out that those who make this argument about the birds in the branches fail to understand or to recognize a very common Hebrew biblical idiom that Jesus is employing. We have at least three places in the Old Testament, if not more, where the exact imagery is used in a way that removes all question as to the meaning of it.

If you look with me, for example, at Daniel chapter 4, in Daniel 4 there is a dream that Nebuchadnezzar had. There's also one in Daniel chapter 2. It's a different dream. There are two significant prophetic dreams that Daniel interpreted for Nebuchadnezzar.

The second of them is in Daniel 4. It's a long one. Let me see where I want to pick up reading it. Look at verse 10.

Daniel 4.10. Nebuchadnezzar is relating the dream. He says, These were the visions of my head while I was on my bed. I was looking and behold a tree in the midst of the earth and its height was great.

The tree grew and became strong. Its height reached to the heavens and it could be seen to the ends of the earth. Its leaves were lovely, its fruit abundant and it was food for all.

Beasts of the field found shade under it and the birds of the heavens dwelt in its branches. And all flesh was fed from it. Then he goes on to talk about how there was a word from a watcher who said, Chop down the tree, leave its stump and it'll sprout again later.

Now we've read enough to get the part that's of interest to us here. He saw in this dream a tree, a large tree, and the beasts of the field found shade under it and the birds of the heavens dwelt in its branches. Now, I need to find the place now where Daniel explains it.

And that would be, where does he begin here? Verse 24. This is the interpretation of King. And this is the decree of the Most High which has come upon my Lord the King.

Well, I'm a little late there. I've got to get a little further down. Verse 20.

The tree that you saw, which grew and became strong, whose height reached to the heavens, and which could be seen by all the earth, whose leaves were lovely and the fruit abundant, and which was food for all, under which the beasts of the field dwelt, and in whose branches the birds of the heavens had their home, it is you, O King, who have grown and become strong, for your greatness has grown and reached to the heavens and your dominion to the end of the earth, and evil has lodged in your branches. Right? No, there's no such application. It's just that he's the tree.

Now, animals dwelling in the shade of the tree are not a particular threat to the tree. Sometimes they can be, but that's not a part of the image. Nor birds in the branches.

The suggestion here, of course, is that as Nebuchadnezzar was king over the whole earth, basically the whole civilized earth of the time, if we could call any part of the earth civilized in those days, that he was providing a covering, as it were, a shelter to lesser nations that he had conquered. He was the overlord, the overarching authority and protector of these lesser nations, which are represented by the birds and the animals that dwelt in the branches. Now, there can be little doubt that this is the meaning, because the same image is used again in another situation, in Ezekiel chapter 31.

In this case, it's not Nebuchadnezzar, but another world ruler, the king of Assyria, that is described. And in Ezekiel 31, beginning with verse 3, it says, Indeed, Assyria was a cedar in Lebanon, with fine branches that shaded the forest, of a high stature and its top

among the thick boughs. The waters made it grow.

Underground waters gave it height, with their rivers running around the place where it was planted, and sent out the rivulets to all the trees of the field. Therefore its height was exalted above all the trees of the field. Its boughs were multiplied, and its branches became long because of the abundance of water as it sent them out.

All the birds of the heavens made their nests in its boughs. Under its branches all the beasts of the field brought forth their young. And in its shadow all great nations made their home.

Now, here we have the interpretation mixed in with the parable itself. We have the king of Assyria, who at this time was a world ruler, or had been, and he was like a big tree, a big cedar tree. And birds lodged in its branches, the wildlife brought forth their young under its shade.

That certainly is an idyllic, peaceable kind of image, certainly not one of some sinister thing happening. And the birds and the animals are interpreted for us before verse 6 is complete. In its shadow all great nations made their home.

So again, we see a figurative, symbolic image of a world ruler, like a tree spreading out its branches, providing shelter, protection, and so forth, for all the nations that are under his control. They are represented as animals and birds when the tree image is used. And therefore, the presence of birds in the branches, both in Daniel 4 and in Ezekiel 31, are certainly not any indication of something evil, but rather they are helpless creatures, the weak, who find protection in the shade of, or in the context of this empire under the protectorate of these mighty kings.

Now if you'll turn to Ezekiel chapter 17, we have the same imagery, this time applied to the kingdom of God. Now Ezekiel, like all of the Old Testament prophets, has passages that talk about the kingdom age, the messianic age, and the coming of the Messiah and the prosperity and peace and victory that he will bring to his people. This is one of those passages.

This is a parable in Ezekiel 17 that is talking about the messianic kingdom. Look at verse 22 through 24 in Ezekiel 17. Thus says the Lord God, And I, the Lord, have brought down the high tree and exalted the low tree, dried up the green tree and made the dry tree to flourish.

And I, the Lord, have spoken and have done it. Now, this is talking about national prosperity of Israel, the dry tree that he makes to flourish, probably with particular reference to them in their captivity. Ezekiel wrote this while they were in Babylonian captivity.

They were like a dried up tree. But he's talking about their future glory, their future

prosperity, which ultimately came about or was expected to come about through the Messiah. In other words, this prophesies a time of God restoring Israel from the Babylonian captivity and ultimately bringing them to a high and glorious place to be the marvel of all other trees.

Now, in this kind of imagery, obviously, trees represent nations. So he's talking about making the kingdom of God, the messianic kingdom, to be higher than and exalted above and the marvel of all other kingdoms or all other nations. Once again, we have this image of the birds finding shelter in its branches.

Now, this starts to look like a pattern. Three great world empires have been spoken of in these prophecies. Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar, Assyria, and now the kingdom of God itself.

Three great world empires that the prophets speak about. In each case, they've been likened to great trees. In the first two cases, Babylon the tree and Assyria the tree were cut down.

We didn't read far enough into it to study that part, but they get cut down. But this kingdom, this great tree in Ezekiel 17 doesn't get cut down. Now, going back to Matthew chapter 13, it becomes clear from the parable of the mustard seed that Jesus moves quickly from the image of a mustard tree into the imagery of the Old Testament prophets about a great tree that fills the whole earth and the birds lodged in its branches.

Now, in none of the Old Testament instances is there the slightest suggestion that the birds in the branches represent evil or that there's some danger or some sinister thing about them. They are simply there as helpless creatures finding protection. And in particular, Ezekiel 31 identifies them as all the nations.

Now, when Jesus then says in verse 32 of Matthew 13 that this mustard seed becomes a tree so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches, it simply is an echo of these numerous Old Testament places which use the same imagery. It is simply saying that the kingdom of God, though it was small while Jesus was there on earth, he was just one seed, had to fall into the ground and die or else he'd remain alone, as he said in John chapter 12. But though he was small and his movement was small in his day, the day would come when it would be the greatest of all movements.

It would be the greatest of all empires. It would be a world kingdom with all the nations lodging in its branches. Now, this is simply agreeable with the Old Testament predictions along the same lines about the kingdom of God.

What Jesus is saying here, though, by the way, is he's emphasizing the fact that although the Jews already had prophetic reasons from the Old Testament to expect the kingdom

to be such a great tree and to have the birds lodging in branches, the unique thing about this parable is that he points out that trees start out small. They start out with seeds. And therefore, the Jews, the believers, his disciples, should not think that the kingdom of God is going to burst onto the scene with a blaze of glory.

It was going to start out small and grow slowly. And that's, of course, what did happen. That's not exactly what they thought was going to happen.

That's the unique element of the parable. There's nothing new revealed in the fact that birds lodge in the branches. That's just a restatement of Old Testament truth.

The new thing about this parable is that it starts out as small as it does, and that's the emphasis of it, that don't think the kingdom is going to be huge immediately. It starts out small. Many great things start out small.

But eventually, it will be a dominant reality and all the birds will lodge in the branches. Now, I'd like to just suggest to you there's not any reason whatsoever to identify the birds in this parable with evil. And there's not the slightest hint that this tree in the parable is endangered by the birds being there.

The importation of that idea is artificial in the extreme, and it's basically agenda-driven. Those who believe that the kingdom of God or the Church has got to go as a failure before God really gets success through Israel in the tribulation period, they simply can't allow that the Church itself is going to succeed, that the Church itself is going to dominate the world. Now, of course, this is good fodder for the post-millennial mills.

The post-mills, they believe that the Church is going to conquer the world, basically. Not militarily, necessarily, or politically, but through evangelism. That the gospel is going to exert a tremendous impact over the entire world, and virtually everybody will be converted.

Now, I myself am not a post-millennialist, and therefore that doesn't describe my personal vision of the end. But one thing I can say is, even though I'm an amillennialist, and there are different kinds of amillennialists, I'd say that this parable gives grounds to be an optimistic person. I'm an optimistic amillennialist.

And some people have said, some post-millennialists have said, well, if somebody describes himself as an optimistic amillennialist, he's just a post-millennialist who hasn't come out of the closet yet, and he's afraid to identify himself with that. That may be true. Maybe someday I'll call myself a post-millennialist, but I don't think so.

The fact is, Jesus does describe the advance of the kingdom of God as something that will be... I mean, the parable ends with success. It doesn't end with failure. Basically, the kingdom of God just gets bigger and bigger and bigger.

And that is spread, of course, through the preaching of the gospel worldwide. Now look at Daniel chapter 2. Daniel has, in another dream of Nebuchadnezzar's, in Daniel chapter 2, Daniel interprets it in order to make another prediction that is relevant to the kingdom of God. And it's very much like this mustard seed parable, except it's not a seed that is in the picture.

But the imagery is very, very similar. In Daniel chapter 2, Nebuchadnezzar is said to have had a dream that awakened him, disturbed, and he called his wise men, and they couldn't do anything for him. And so Daniel is brought in, volunteers, and comes in and gives an interpretation of the dream.

The dream consisted of a great image, apparently a statue made of four metals. The head was of gold, the chest was of silver, the belly was of brass, and the legs were of iron. And as you proceed down to the feet, there was a mixture of iron and clay.

Now that's not the whole thing. The action, the only action in the dream was a stone, not of human origin, not made with hands, comes and smites this image in the feet and topples it. The whole thing apparently just crumbled straight down and this stone grew into a great mountain to fill the whole earth.

And it did so by grinding up this image into fine dust, and it was carried away like the fine dust or the fine chaff on the threshing floor. This is how the dream is described. I'm summarizing because it's a long chapter, I don't want to read it all.

But Daniel, when he comes in to interpret it, says this image represents, well, King Nebuchadnezzar, the head of gold is you, the Babylonian power. The Babylonian kingdom is the head of gold. He says, now after you, there will arise another nation inferior to yourself that will rule the world.

That was the Medes and the Persians. They were represented by the chest of silver. Which begins to set a pattern, and we recognize that as we consider the image, it is a chronological picture of successive kingdoms.

The head is where you start and you work down to the feet through time. So the head of gold is Babylon, the chest of silver is Medo-Persia. He goes on and points out that the belly of brass is a third kingdom.

Historically we know it to be the Grecian Empire and Alexander the Great. The legs of iron represent the Roman Empire. And so, you know, on through history it goes.

Now, once you get to the feet, you have some action taking place. This stone comes and smites the image in the feet. And then that stone grows into a great mountain to fill the earth.

The interpretation of that is given in Daniel 2.44. Daniel says, in the days of these kings,

that would be the kings previously mentioned, most recently mentioned was the Roman Empire. The legs of iron. In the days of these kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed and the kingdom shall not be left to other people.

It shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms and it shall stand forever. Inasmuch as you saw that the stone was cut out of the mountain without hands and that it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver and the gold, the great God has made known to the king what will come to pass after this. The dream is certain and the interpretation is sure.

Now, he identifies this stone that was made without hands or cut without hands as the kingdom of the God of heaven. The God of heaven will establish a kingdom in the days of these other rulers. Of course, the Roman Empire is the last one mentioned so it would be in the time of the Roman Empire.

The God of heaven would establish a kingdom and that kingdom would fill the whole earth, would grow like starting from small beginnings as a stone into a great mountain to fill the earth. Isn't that quite like the mustard seed starting out very small and growing into a great tree? It's the same idea. Both are descriptions of the kingdom of God.

Now, by the way, the dispensationalists are not unaware of this passage. They just are unaware of what it means. They know what it seems to mean.

It seems to mean that Jesus came and established a kingdom that is never going to be destroyed and is going to only grow and grow and grow until it fills the whole earth at his coming. Now, since that doesn't accord with the dispensational program, they say, well, this kingdom has not yet been established. Once Jesus comes back, he will establish the kingdom.

And then, of course, that's the millennial kingdom and then it'll just grow and grow and it'll last forever. They don't believe that Jesus established the kingdom at his first coming. And therefore, this passage, like many others, which would naturally apply to the first coming of Christ, and by the way, the church historically always understood this to be a reference to the first coming of Christ.

All the commentators before 1830 understood it that way because that's the natural way of understanding it. The dispensationalists who arose in 1830 have consistently said, no, this is not going to happen. This didn't happen at the first coming of Christ.

This is going to happen at the second coming of Christ. Now, the difficulty with that is the time element there because Daniel says, in the days of these kings this is going to happen. Now, who are the kings? Well, Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome.

Now, the Roman Empire is no longer around, so one would assume that the fulfillment of

this must have already taken place back when the Roman Empire was still around since it had to happen in the days of the kings that are mentioned there. It certainly would not be expected to happen after the fall of the Roman Empire and therefore it would not be the future from our perspective. But the dispensationalists have worked everything out.

They say, these kings do not refer to the ancient Roman Empire but to a revived Roman Empire in the last days. There's a good chance you've heard about this revived Roman Empire. Hal Lindsay's book *The Late Great Planet Earth* had a whole chapter about the revived Roman Empire.

It's a typical dispensational thing to talk about that there's going to be in Europe a ten-nation confederacy of nations rising out of the old Roman Empire and they will be the kingdom of the Antichrist and so forth. Now, let me just say this. There is no place in the entire Bible that speaks of a revived Roman Empire.

It essentially originates, the idea originates with this passage and the dispensational attempts to try to make the kingdom of God future instead of present. And they have to say, no doubt, there's no question that Daniel is saying the kingdom of God is going to be established during the reign of Roman Empire. That's clear in the passage.

But what they say is there's a huge gap between the legs and the feet. That the ancient Roman Empire is the legs and this revived Roman Empire in the last days, not yet established, but will be perhaps in our time, they think, that is the feet. So there's this huge cut at the ankles with about 1,500 years between the ankle and the feet because the feet, the ankles are history, but the feet are still future.

And this is, it's by inserting gaps like this throughout various prophetic passages that the dispensationalists save their doctrine from absurdity, but not successfully. They try, but they don't manage it. And so this is where they come from.

But you know, if you don't postulate all of these hidden gaps which are not hinted at anywhere in scripture, certainly there's no hint in Nebuchadnezzar's dream that there's a huge gap of 1,500 years from the end of the career of the legs to the beginning of the career of the feet. It's just one continuous image. It's one image as near as we can tell.

The historic interpretation of the passage would seem to be more fitting with the actual wording of the passage that Jesus established the kingdom of God at his first coming. He was a stone. He's a stone that those builders rejected.

He came and he smote the Roman Empire, not in the sense of, you know, raising up a Jewish army to fight against the Romans, but in the sense of planting a seed that would later grow up and conquer the world. And you know, the Roman Empire was conquered by Christianity or by something that called itself Christianity. And of course, the whole world has been infiltrated by Christianity.

So Jesus' prediction in the parable of the mustard seed is very much like the Daniel passage in Daniel chapter 2. The stone began small, grew into a great mountain to fill the earth. The mustard seed starts out small, grows into a great plant to fill the earth or to shelter the birds of the air, the nations of the world. All right.

Now, back to Matthew 13. Just one point of clarification on this parable of the mustard seed. Those who are looking desperately for problems in the Scriptures to try to prove they're not inspired have often pointed out that the mustard seed is not the smallest of all seeds.

There are some seeds smaller. And Jesus said in verse 32 that mustard seed is indeed the least of all the seeds. But I think we need to understand that Jesus was not trying to make a sweeping comment about all the seeds in the entire world.

He was talking about all the seeds that were planted by those people in those days. They dealt with seeds. They planted seeds.

And of all the seeds that they dealt with, the mustard seed was the smallest. He's not making a statement about universal issues in biology. He's talking about in the framework of their agriculture.

They used barley. They used wheat. They used, of course, pits from dates and fruit and so forth.

But of all the seeds they ever planted, the mustard seed was the smallest one they ever dealt with. I've seen mustard seeds only a few times. How many of you may have had occasion to see a mustard seed? Very, very small.

In some Christian bookstores, you know, someone's capitalized on this and put these mustard seeds in amber and plastic or something. And you can see these tiny little things. They're indeed the smallest seed in common agricultural use in those days and maybe today.

I don't know. Very small. There are, of course, some seeds in the world that are smaller, but that's not... You know, to make Jesus' statement extend to, you know, to endeavor to include all those is to put something into his mouth that he's not trying to say.

In any case, people who are always looking for inaccuracies and problems in the Scripture will usually snag that one. Let's go on to the parable of the leaven then. Another parable, verse 33, he spoke to them, the kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal until it was all leavened.

Now here, again, we need to consider at least the dispensational arguments because they're so contrary to what common sense would tell you about the passage. They say that the kingdom of heaven or the church is actually the lump of dough and that the

leaven represents evil that infiltrates the church in the last days. Well, too bad Jesus said it the way he did, if that's what he intended to mean.

Jesus should then have said the kingdom of God is like three measures of meal into which some woman put leaven. Now, some have said, you know, woman, you know, is the one who stuck the leaven in there and that proves that woman is a bad influence in the church. I've actually heard commentators make some issue of that.

You know, Jesus pointed out it was a woman who put it in there and, you know, probably referenced to Eve, you know, bringing sin into the world or something. I think this, again, is going far beyond what Jesus intended to indicate. I don't think the woman is significant, in fact, except for the fact that he's telling a parable about daily life and the women made the bread.

The men didn't. The men went out and grew the wheat and the women made it into bread. Therefore, when he says a woman put this leaven in three meals of dough, he's not accentuating the role of woman in the deal.

He's just making a parable based on real life. I mean, women made the bread. You wouldn't find men very commonly putting leaven in dough, but you'd commonly find women.

Every woman would do so in her own, she'd bake her own bread and therefore it was a very common thing. But the interesting thing here is he doesn't say the kingdom of heaven is like a lump of dough into which somebody insinuated leaven, which became a problem to it. He says the kingdom of God is like leaven.

Now, you'd have to do total violence to the actual wording of the passage to suggest that the leaven represents something other than the kingdom itself. The dough, then, represents the element into which the kingdom has come. And almost certainly it refers to the world or society in general, you know, the world of humanity.

The kingdom of God exists like the wheat among the tares. But, you know, the wheat and the tares parable and the fish and the dragnet, we talked about those last time, both of them speak about the kingdom of God existing alongside the world. Remember the wheat and the tares? The wheat was allowed to continue to grow and the tares together until the end and then there's going to be this harvest and the tares will be gathered out and the wheat will be gathered into a barn.

The idea of that parable was that the kingdom of God or kingdom of heaven, at least in the phase that Jesus was inaugurating at his first coming, was not going to eliminate evil from the world entirely. It wasn't, you know, that wasn't how it was going to happen. It was going to coexist side by side with evil.

It would be at the end and only at the end that evil would be eradicated from the world

until then the kingdom of God would dwell side by side in a mixed environment. Now, these parables, especially this one of the leaven, adds something more to that. The idea that the kingdom of God exists alongside the kingdom of darkness and that the children of the kingdom live in the same world as the children of the wicked one is introduced in the wheat and the tares, but what this tells us is that the kingdom of God is not a passive participant in this environment.

It's not just that the wheat grows up and minds its own business and the tares grow up and mind their own business. I mean, when you're using the imagery of wheat and tares, you can't really do much more than just have them coexist, but, I mean, wheat has no effect on tares. Therefore, a new parable has to be employed to point out exactly what effect the presence of the children of the kingdom have upon the children of the wicked one.

What effect the presence of the kingdom has on the world in which it is planted. It's like something that's, like leaven that's put into three measures of meal. Now, three measures is a fairly large amount, enough for three people to eat, and yet a little pinch of leaven.

Leaven, of course, is just yeast. A very small amount of yeast or leaven is added to a lump of dough, and yet that's enough. It doesn't have to be large because it amazingly exerts an influence over that lump of dough disproportionate to its own volume or its own amount.

And what he is saying is, he's just told us in the previous parable, the kingdom of God is a little thing. It starts out little. It gets big.

Now he tells us it's like leaven. It's little compared to the amount it's put in, but it has a profound effect over the entire lump. The entire lump is leavened eventually.

Now, does this mean that the presence of the kingdom of God in the world is going to result in the conversion of the entire world? This is, of course, what the postmillennial view is. And there are opposite poles from the dispensationalists. The dispensationalists believe the church is going to be a total failure.

The postmillennialists think it's going to be a total success and everyone's going to get saved almost. Of course, we all millennials are the only ones who are perfectly balanced and as usual. We would not say, I would not say, that this parable is predicting the conversion of everybody.

The fact that the whole lump rises does not mean that all of the wheat turns into leaven. Certainly wheat doesn't turn into leaven. But the bigger picture is that the alternative society under King Jesus has a profound uplifting effect on the society that is of the world.

And although we can say that we've not even come close, not even come close to converting everybody in the world to Christianity, or even everybody in America or Europe, which is where Christianity has been for many hundreds of years, yet those places where the kingdom of God has been have been blessed. The whole standard of living, the whole appreciation of human rights and human dignity, the whole level of prosperity, of nations, is enhanced by the presence of a virulent representation of Christians. The church, in the midst of a society, enhances that society tremendously.

In fact, I think most people who have their eyes open realize that the whole reason that Western civilization is collapsing as it is now is simply because the church has ceased to do so. Jesus said the church is the salt of the earth, but if it loses its saltiness, it's not going to have any value. And likewise, if leaven somehow dies, it won't have any value either in the society it's in.

But the church is not supposed to be dead. The church is supposed to be alive and well and exerting influence over society. Now, this influence is through righteousness, it's through evangelism, it's through making disciples.

Many people would understand, of course, as we pointed out in earlier sessions, that the church's means of blessing society is through political action or some other means like that. And of course, there is some tremendous disagreement among Christians about that. They don't divide into neat camps in that respect.

In any given church, you might find some who do and some who do not emphasize or believe in the validity of Christians exploiting the political means to bring about change in society. But my own view is that that is not the means that Jesus ordained or that the apostles ever pursued or ever advocated, but that evangelism itself has shown itself to be a mighty factor. And the preaching of righteousness, the preaching of the gospel, and the prayers of the saints, all of these things are spiritual dynamics.

They're not political, they're spiritual. And in places where the church has been, eventually this stone crumbles. The other elements that were there before, the other metals, the Roman Empire fell, Christianity.

And, you know, the fall of the Soviet Union in very recent memory it's difficult to say, I mean, in the natural, it would be difficult to say exactly why did the Iron Curtain fall? Why did the Soviet Union dissolve as it did? Why did the Berlin Wall come down? Someone might give it an entirely sociological explanation and say, well, it's simply because economically the people were oppressed and they just resisted it and eventually the walls came down. But really it's extremely difficult to point to any particular political or sociological things that resulted in this. I am of the opinion it's the prayers of the saints really that caused this to happen.

And there were a lot of godly saints within those countries. In Russia there's probably as

many godly evangelicals as there are in America, maybe more. They were just underground but they were there and they were praying and they were leavened and they affected a change.

At least that's my interpretation of the situation. Some would see it otherwise. But the church is a powerful leavening influence in society and Jesus predicted that it would have an influence on society.

Now, while there is something similar about these two parables there's also something dissimilar. Both parables speak of something which is small initially but grows and spreads and is hardly recognizable in its latter end for its size and prominence and influence. They have that in common.

What they do not have in common and where they are contrasted is that the parable of the mustard seed would only be able to tell us how big the kingdom is going to be. It's going to be large. In Jesus' day it was not large or formidable but it was something that would eventually be something to be reckoned with.

A large empire worldwide. And that it is. That it has become a spiritual one but nonetheless a worldwide empire under Jesus which every Christian is.