

# Matthew 13:24-43: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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- [ 0 : 0 0 ]     Matthew chapter 13 verses 24 to 43 He put another parable before them saying, The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field.
- But while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also.
- And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds? He said to them, An enemy has done this.
- So the servants said to him, Then do you want us to go and gather them? But he said, No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, But gather the wheat into my barn.
- He put another parable before them saying, The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.
- [ 1 : 1 9 ]     He told them another parable, The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour till it was all leavened. All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables.
- Indeed he said nothing to them without a parable. This was to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet, I will open my mouth in parables. I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world.
- Then he left the crowds and went into the house, and his disciples came to him saying, Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field. He answered, The one who sows the good seed is the son of man, the field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom.
- The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age.
- The son of man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all lawbreakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.
- [ 2 : 3 4 ]     Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their father. He who has ears, let him hear. Matthew 13 involves three cycles of parables, and in the centre section we have the parable of the wheat and the tares as the core parable.
- There are common assumptions that these parables are timeless moral fables, or perhaps illustrations of what is true for people in the age of the church. But Jesus is speaking as one fulfilling the prophets, one in the line of the prophets, bringing their missions to a climax.

And it's very difficult to understand what he's saying without taking that into account. The parables are primarily speaking to a first century context, to Israel's experience and situation.

Once again, the parables here are about sowing and growing. The parable of the wheat and the tares is a parable also about harvest. Jesus has already spoken about the harvest at the end of chapter 9.

Then he said to his disciples, The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest. And those themes of harvest are ones that continue throughout the chapters that follow.

[ 3 : 47 ] Jesus and his kingdom are initiating a time of division, of judgment, and Israel needs to be prepared for this. They're going to have to be judged as a result of how they received Jesus himself and his messengers.

We often think of Jesus as standing at the beginning of the parables, the one who sets things in motion that will continue for the period of the church age, finally coming to their conclusion in the second coming.

But in most of the parables, the stories are coming to their climax in Christ. Christ is the one who completes the ministry of the prophets. He's the one who comes as the son after the servants have been cruelly treated.

In the context of these parables, Jesus refers to Psalm 78, the opening verses of that. That psalm is a retelling of Israel's history, a telling of Israel's history as one of constant failure and rebellion and disobedience, leading up to the establishment of David as king.

Jesus is revealing the hidden truth of Israel's history in his teaching. He's telling Israel's history in the form of these parables. Now the seed is sown in the world, not just the land.

[ 4 : 58 ] And I believe the seed being spoken of here is the diaspora, the scattering of Israel among the nations. The very etymology of the word diaspora involves the notion of sowing.

Israel is sown among the nations so that they might grow in these different parts of the world. Now we often think about the scattering of Israel purely in terms of judgment. But it wasn't just judgment.

We can see in many cases that the Israelites were having influence, that they were gaining prominence and power and speaking for God in various parts of the world. However, as faithful Israelites were growing up throughout the known world, so were unfaithful ones.

It wasn't just Daniels and Esthers and figures like that. It was also unfaithful people, people who were causing trouble and causing the Gentiles to blaspheme the name of God.

Both seemed to be thriving together. And prophets and angels might ask God, Why isn't he separating them? Why isn't he removing these tares? However, now the field is white for harvest, and the division is about to take place.

[ 6 : 03 ] The cities that Jesus and his disciples go through are being prepared to stand in the judgment. And it will be worse for those that reject Christ and his disciples than cities such as Sodom and Gomorrah or Tyre and Sidon.

The kingdom, then, is bringing about a sifting process, the initiation of a process of separation. In the parable of the mustard seed that follows, Jesus is once again working with Old Testament background and talking about the story of Israel.

More particularly, he's working with the parable of Ezekiel in Ezekiel chapter 17. In that parable, there are two eagles representing Babylon and the Egyptians. The Babylonian eagle snaps off part of this cedar tree, its topmost of its young twigs, and carries it to a land of trade, sets it in a city of merchants, places it beside abundant waters, and it starts to sprout and become a low-spreading vine.

Its branches turn towards it, and it becomes a prosperous vine. There is then another eagle that comes along, representing Egypt, and that eagle causes the vine to move towards it, and the vine withers as it does so.

God then declares that, at the end, I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar, and will set it out. I will break off from the topmost of its young twigs, a tender one, and I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain.

[ 7 : 30 ] On the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bear branches, and produce fruit, and become a noble cedar. And under it will dwell every kind of bird. In the shade of its branches, birds of every sort will nest.

And all of the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord. I bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree. Dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish.

I am the Lord. I have spoken, and I will do it. Within that parable of Ezekiel, we have many of the same themes. We have the idea of sowing. We have the idea of this tree that becomes great and prospers.

And this tree compared with all the other trees, we have the elements of the birds coming to take rest in its branches, and shade beneath it. Similar language is also found in the book of Daniel, in reference to Nebuchadnezzar.

The tree is a symbol of a powerful empire, or a ruler, one that provides refuge and strength for others. Nebuchadnezzar is symbolized in the vision.

[ 8 : 33 ] The tree grew and became strong, and its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth. Its leaves were beautiful, and its fruit abundant. And in it was food for all.

The beasts of the field found shade under it, and the birds of the heavens lived in its branches, and all flesh was fed from it. That tree will later be locked down, as God judges Nebuchadnezzar.

But the symbolism is there again. Further symbolism that might be in the background of this particular parable is found just two chapters earlier in the book of Daniel, where the stone that comes down grows into a mountain that fills the whole earth.

Now while Jesus is using the background of Ezekiel, he does not mention a cedar tree. Rather, he talks about a mustard seed, and a mustard seed that eventually grows into a tree, and becomes larger than all the garden plants, and the birds of the air come and make their nests in its branches.

It's this great tree that stands out from the other trees. It's a very strange way to describe it, particularly since it defies all botanical reality. But that's because this isn't an illustration taken from nature.

[ 9 : 44 ] It's playing off against the image of the cedar. The cedars, like Babylon or the Romans or the Greeks, stand out on this horizon. They're these vast trees.

And yet Israel seems like this small, measly bush. It's a mustard bush. It's not actually a tree at all. But yet, what Jesus is saying is that it is a tree.

It's a great tree, great among all the other trees. And it is actually the central tree. It isn't great by nature. It has the smallest seed of all.

Also, not just the smallest seed of all, but naturally it just becomes a bush. But yet, in God's kingdom, it is that great tree. It is the one that fulfills all these promises of this mountain that will fill the earth, of this tree that will give rest to birds in its branches.

What is happening with the mustard seed is not natural, but it is a sign of God's power and God's involvement. God is going to establish his kingdom through a mustard seed, not through the great cedars of the world.

[ 10 : 48 ] The parable of the leaven that follows works with very similar themes. The leaven, which isn't the same as yeast, it's more like sourdough, is hidden in three measures of flour.

Israel, as it's scattered throughout the world, as it's hidden among these different measures of flour, causes the nations to rise up, like yeast has that effect in flour.

Israel has been hidden among the nations by God, and this is part of God's purpose. It is part of the means by which the kingdom is established. When Paul and others go on their missionary journeys throughout the world, everywhere they go, pretty much, there are synagogues.

There are faithful Jews who are prepared to hear the message of the gospel. This is part of how the early church develops. Maybe this is what's being referred to. But this isn't a dramatic process.

It's a gradual process. It isn't glorious. It uses leaven. Leaven is something that has a lot of negative connotations in Scripture. It might be seen as unclean. But yet, this is the means by which God works.

[ 11 : 51 ] Not in a glorious, dramatic way. Not through this great establishment of a kingdom on the front stage, but in very silent, hidden, imperceptible ways.

The work of the kingdom is going on in these different places. The parables of the mustard seed and of the leaven are twin parables. And as we look through the gospels, we'll see several sets of twin parables or even triplet parables.

And these can be more readily understood when they're related to each other. They're seldom identical twins though. The point is not just to repeat what has already been said using a different illustration.

It's not what's going on. Rather, they represent different aspects of Israel's ministry in relationship to the nations. The parable of the mustard seed highlights the smallness of Israel relative to the nations.

The parable of the leaven represents the hiddenness of the work of the kingdom that's being carried out through them. Hiddenness is an important theme in these places. The work of the kingdom is marked by insignificant and inglorious origins.

[ 12 : 54 ] Note that in the twinning, one parable involves a man sowing seed and its counterpart involves a woman hiding leaven. Both involve an intentional action towards a goal with significant results but imperceptible processes.

And the fact that one involves a man and the other involves a woman suggests to me that we're supposed to see a marriage here. Not a literal marriage between the two characters of the parables, but the parables themselves are, as it were, a married pair.

And as you read them together, you'll understand them in ways that you would not if you read them separately. Matthew says that Jesus speaks in parables to fulfil the words found near the beginning of Psalm 78, which, as I've mentioned already, recounts Israel's history leading up to the establishment of the kingdom of David.

And as the son of David, he's doing the same thing in relationship to his own kingdom. Our section ends with Jesus explaining the parable of the weeds, or the parable of the wheat and the tares.

[ 14 : 22 ] A question to consider. The teaching of the parables is not exclusive to the situation of Israel in the first century and its identity.

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