

4. The Leaven

“He told them another parable, saying, “The kingdom of the heavens is like leaven which a woman, after getting it, hides in three seahs of meal, till the whole dough was leavened.””

(Matthew 13:33 FT; also Luke 13:20-21)

Going by the usual meaning of leaven throughout Scripture, it would appear that, in this parable, Jesus continued to focus on the more negative aspects of the secrets of the kingdom, which he had begun to introduce in the parable of the Wheat and the Darnel – that is, the increase of wickedness and error in the present age.

Leaven or yeast is a kind of fungus that is used for the process of fermentation in baking bread and cakes, as well as in brewing wine and beer. During the fermentation process in baking bread, the yeast breaks down the carbohydrates giving off small bubbles of carbon dioxide gas. This permeates the mixture causing the dough to ‘rise’ by becoming light and porous. In fact, the Greek word for leaven is *zume*, which literally means *ferment*.

Throughout Scripture, leaven is generally used as a symbol of wickedness, corruption and error. In Exodus 12, we have the first account of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which began with the Passover meal.

“For seven days you are to eat bread made **without yeast**. On the first day remove the yeast from your houses, for whoever eats anything with yeast in it from the first day until the seventh must be cut off from Israel.”

(Exodus 12:15 NIV; also 18-20)

This feast introduced the principle to Israel that yeast was symbolically a bad thing, even though the initial reason as to why leaven was not used during Passover was because the Israelites had to leave Egypt quickly, so they didn’t have time to add leaven to their bread. Nevertheless, in the Law, yeast was not generally allowed in any of the offerings made to Yahweh for the reason given above – it symbolised corruption (Exodus 23:18). Yet there was one major exception to this rule of unleavened sacrifices – the two loaves of bread offered as firstfruits at Pentecost (Leviticus 23:17-20).

These were to be leavened loaves because they symbolised the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, which was a firstfruits of the Spirit poured out on Israelites who were still in bodies of sinful flesh. The early church was made up of Jews and Gentiles who had received the firstfruits of the Spirit while in sinful flesh (represented in the two loaves of bread made with yeast). This truth was also symbolised in the Fellowship or Peace Offering, which included leavened cakes of bread as part of the sacrifice (Leviticus 7:11-14).

The firstfruit loaves offered at Pentecost represented the collective Assembly of God as a whole, and the cakes offered as peace offerings represented the individual believer before God. In Christ, leavened humans are made clean by the word of truth, that is, we become unleavened; nevertheless, we still have a body that

belongs to the old creation, cursed by sin and death. Only in resurrection do we receive our spiritual bodies fitted for a new creation, when our deliverance will be complete.

Paul is alluding to the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and the clear symbolism of yeast, in the following texts.

“...Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? Clean out the old yeast, then, **that you may be a fresh batch without yeast – as you really are.** For Christ, our Passover, has been sacrificed for our sakes so that we may be keeping the Festival, **not with old yeast, the yeast of evil and wickedness,** but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.”

(1 Corinthians 5:6-8 FT)

“A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough.”

(Galatians 5:9 NIV)

As far as the contexts of these words are concerned, in the first instance, Paul was rebuking the Corinthian church for their indifference to sexual immorality, because the *sins of the flesh* were being tolerated amongst them. And in the second text, he was reminding the Galatians that *false teaching and error*, particularly that which opposes the gospel of grace and exalts religious rituals instead, is a seductive and corrupting influence, and it spreads.

Hypocrisy and False Teaching

Jesus himself confirmed these two aspects of the symbolism of yeast, that of personal sin and doctrinal error, in the following texts. Both are a corrupting influence.

““Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy... Be careful... Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod... Be careful... Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and the Sadducees”... Then they understood that He was not telling them to guard against the yeast used in bread, **but against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.**”

(Luke 12:1; Mark 8:15; Matthew 16:6, 11-12 NIV)

It is clear from these three passages that the yeast of the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and that of King Herod, was

a) *Hypocrisy* (that is, pretending to be something you're not, or saying one thing and doing another; both are false), whether religious or political hypocrisy; and

b) *False teaching or doctrine.*

The rabbinical sect of the Pharisees, which Paul belonged to at one time, were considered more 'fundamental' and 'orthodox' than the priestly sect of the Sadducees, yet Jesus told his disciples to be on guard against *both* of these sects

and their respective teachings, because, not only did they contain error due to the traditions and teachings of men, but these sects were largely composed of hypocritical liars who did not know God in their hearts, in spirit, no matter how zealous they were. They did not truly practice what they so religiously preached. They would rather cling to their traditions than seek out and believe the truth of God. True disciples of Christ and of God on the other hand are to be like unleavened bread, full of sincerity, truth, goodness, righteousness and love, as those who worship the Father in Spirit and in truth.

The Woman and the Yeast

Therefore, in this parable of the Leaven, we have the following picture. A woman gets some yeast and mixes it into three measures of meal until the whole batch of dough is leavened. Now take note of the original quote that we started with; the original Greek says that the woman *hides* the yeast in the dough. This could be indicating that this should've been an unleavened batch, but the woman had secretly introduced yeast into the dough! If this is the case, then this intimates that *seduction* is involved.

Now the leavening process eventually causes carbon dioxide gas to form in the dough, which distends or 'puffs up' the dough and makes it light and porous. This is also what sin does! It releases poison that corrupts, which fills us with pride and all manner of sin and wickedness – but it is all light and fluffy and full of holes, with no real substance. Jesus was saying here that this hypocrisy, and false teaching, and evil, and wickedness, and corruption, and lawlessness, would be subtly and seductively introduced into the Church and it would eventually permeate the whole lot as the age progresses!

It is worth noting here, that even in relation to the physical body, yeast and fungal overgrowth is often the root cause of many illnesses and various symptoms of disease. The yeast *Candida Albicans*, for instance, is the most common, which can cause *Candidiasis* with all manner of distressing and debilitating symptoms. This doesn't mean that all yeast is bad for our health, because, to the contrary, many good bacteria thrive in fermented foods, but in general, yeast and fungi need to be kept in check. It's all about the positive or the negative; the perfect or the imperfect; the good or the bad.

Anyhow, you could be thinking, 'is there any significance as to why it says 'three seahs or measures of meal?' It is possible that this is referring to the three divisions of humanity. Firstly, the portion of mankind that originated in the ancient Near East were divided into three major groups, that of Shem, Ham and Japheth. The table of nations in Genesis 10 lists the original tribes and peoples that descended from Noah's three sons, from which the vast majority of civilised humanity subsequently descended.

These three divisions are also represented in the book of Acts, whereby the gospel went out to all nations, namely, the Jews and Samaritans (Shem), the Ethiopian Eunuch (Ham), and the Roman Centurion, Cornelius (Japheth). Paul also refers to another three-fold division that encompasses all mankind – the Jew, the Greek (or Gentile), and the Assembly (or Church) of God (1 Corinthians 10:32). Applied individually, it could also be referring to Body, Soul and Spirit.

Be that as it may, it appears evident that Jesus was indicating in this parable that the whole Church, throughout all nations, would become tainted with this 'yeast' in the age of the kingdom of the heavens. And it would also make sense that 'the woman', who introduced the yeast into the dough, was representing Secret Babylon, the Prostitute of Revelation 17-18.

Having said all that, it is possible that Jesus may have been alluding to the positive aspect of the yeast permeating through the dough, causing it to expand – something the kingdom of God would continue to do throughout this age. This would then carry a meaning similar to the previous parable of the Mustard Seed. Nevertheless, this is not the usual understanding of the "leaven" motif, as shown above.

Copyright © Gerry Watts 2009; Revised Edition 2013