

THINGS TOO WONDERFUL—WEEK 1

THE KINGDOM AND THE CHURCH



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

Things Too Wonderful, Week 1 — The Kingdom and the Church

The things of God are wonderful, beautiful, and glorifying. We should thank God for His cleverness, creativity, holiness, and mercy every day.

But Job said that he spoke of things “too wonderful for me.” Is there something we’re supposed to avoid talking about, or even thinking about?

We investigate that in this series.

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1 Job 42:3b (NKJV)

*Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
Things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.*

Job graduates the College of Hard Knocks with a precious insight—knowledge of God is above his pay grade. It's above all our pay grades.

So, what are we to do? Should we try to comprehend the incomprehensible?

*O LORD, my heart is not lifted up;
my eyes are not raised too high;
I do not occupy myself with things
too great and too marvelous for me. — Psalm 131:1 (ESV)*

Is trying to comprehend *things too great and too marvelous* raising our eyes *too high*? The psalmist seems to be saying that, especially when he continues with:

*But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
like a weaned child with its mother;
like a weaned child is my soul within me. — Psalm 131:2 (ESV)*

It is good to be satisfied with incomplete understanding of the incomprehensible. Anything else is a prescription for agony. Still, Jesus taught many lessons about Himself and His kingdom. He doesn't want us to ignore the topic.

So, we come to a narrow conclusion. We're supposed to study wonderful things, yet not expect to master the subject. Demanding perfect understanding is an error, which leads to an unquieted soul.

This seems close to a contradiction. Are we supposed to be content with our understanding or not? Can we have it both ways?

A good answer comes from baseball. Baseball players like to say that hitting is one of the most difficult tasks known to man. You fail most of the time—getting out. A batter who succeeds one-third of the time is a good hitter. The last batter to succeed forty percent of the time (Ted Williams) is famous for it.

So we find a similar “near contradiction.” A baseball player can have a batting average everyone admires and still strive to improve. He's happy but never satisfied.

Welcome to life in Christ. We're supposed to pursue understanding and excellence in all things, yet not be neurotic about it. We're supposed to have peace, while still striving to improve.

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. — Philippians 4:6–7 (NKJV)

2 Matthew 13:10–13 (NKJV)

And the disciples came and said to Him, “Why do You speak to them in parables?”

He answered and said to them, “Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.”

Jesus doesn't say that this is about things being too wonderful to understand. He's speaks of people who don't, or won't, understand things they should understand.

But notice that His disciples don't ask, “*Why do you speak to us in parables?*” They ask, “*Why do You speak to them in parables?*”

Of course, Jesus is speaking in parables to everyone, notably you and me, but their question is just about one group of listeners.

Then Jesus answers a question they didn't ask. He tells them, and us, that we are able to *know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven*. He doesn't focus first on the “*them*” they asked about but on the disciples themselves. He isn't just saying that He speaks in parables to “*them*” because they can't understand, He's emphasizing that we can.

This is shockingly encouraging. No doubt, the things of God are beyond human comprehension. Still, Jesus tells us, straight up, that, “*It has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven.*”

We can't know everything, but we can know a lot.

The analogical teaching in Jesus's parables typically relates two things that aren't the least bit similar. The kingdom of heaven doesn't look anything like the things in His parables. For example, it doesn't look like a batch of bread dough. Comparing those two is a stretch. Why do this?

He's calling us to use our imagination!

That feels dangerous. I can imagine a lot of things, many of them wrong. How can we do this safely?

Recognize the danger. Stay humble. Realize that the things we imagine are not the full, accurate truth (otherwise Jesus could have just told us that and been done with it.) Don't let the products of our imagination turn into idols. And, most importantly, stick to the Bible's teaching, carefully interpreted.

So, that's where this series is going. We're headed down a dangerous and complex path, always trying to be as careful as we can be.

It'll be full of warnings and caveats, but it goes somewhere.

3 Matthew 13:31–33 (NKJV)

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 the seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the 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 leavened.”

These parables describe one aspect of the Kingdom—its spread. The first one is designed to amaze the listeners. A mustard seed grows from tiny to huge, so it can serve functions that only large trees can serve. There’s a deep and important point here that’s easy to miss—the kingdom of heaven starts out small.

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” — Matthew 3:1–2 (NKJV)

The kingdom has a starting point in time. It did not exist from the beginning of creation. Jesus inaugurated the kingdom. From that starting point it grew from tiny beginnings to be great.

Conversely, the parable about the leaven is about how small everything outside the kingdom will get. All of the meal got leavened; none remained unleavened. The kingdom of heaven takes over everything.

It’s glorious that our modern understanding of the action of leavening is a better analogy for the spread of the kingdom than what Jesus’s first century hearers would have understood. We know from biology that the leavening grows and reproduces inside the meal; it doesn’t just disperse and get diluted.

So it is with the kingdom of heaven. It doesn’t just spread; it grows.

Do not make the mistake of equating the kingdom of heaven with the church. Yes, Jesus also inaugurated His church, and it also started out small.

“And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.” — Matthew 16:18 (NKJV)

The kingdom and the church are related, but they’re not the same thing. Specifically, not everyone will be saved. The church grows but, unlike the kingdom, things outside the church remain.

The church is the agent of the kingdom, the broker, the channel. The kingdom is larger and more abstract.

Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.
— Philippians 2:9–11 (NKJV)

That covers a lot.

4 Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43 (ESV)

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.”””

So, is the kingdom analogous to the man? The field? The plants? What?

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 law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.” — Matthew 36–43 (ESV)

The kingdom is all of it.

In His explanation of the parable, Jesus details the role of many parts and players, but He doesn’t label any of them as the kingdom itself. The whole parable is about the kingdom.

The world is just a part of that.

Also notice who the *sons of the kingdom* are. Jesus is king of all, but not everyone is a son of the kingdom.

From Matthew 13:33, we learned that the kingdom would grow until there’s nothing left outside the kingdom. From this parable, we learn that inside the kingdom there are both friends and enemies.

Those who aren’t *sons of the kingdom*, are still in the kingdom; they’re still part of the kingdom.

They just aren’t citizens.

5 Luke 14:15–24 (NKJV)

Now when one of those who sat at the table with Him heard these things, he said to Him, “Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God!”

Then He said to him, “A certain man gave a great supper and invited many, and sent his servant at supper time to say to those who were invited, ‘Come, for all things are now ready.’ But they all with one accord began to make excuses. The first said to him, ‘I have bought a piece of ground, and I must go and see it. I ask you to have me excused.’ And another said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to test them. I ask you to have me excused.’ Still another said, ‘I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.’ So that servant came and reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house, being angry, said to his servant, ‘Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in here the poor and the maimed and the lame and the blind.’ And the servant said, ‘Master, it is done as you commanded, and still there is room.’ Then the master said to the servant, ‘Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled. For I say to you that none of those men who were invited shall taste my supper.’ ”

This passage supports and clarifies yesterday’s parable of the good and bad seed from Matthew 13. While the kingdom will ultimately encompass everything, there will be many people who will not “*taste my supper.*”

And they were invited! That’s so sad.

The kingdom of heaven is everything Jesus is king of. That’s not just people, places and things; it’s all of creation plus heavenly realms beyond our imagination.

But what about the timing? Jesus inaugurated the kingdom of heaven. It started small. It grew to encompass everything. But when?

And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Amen. — Matthew 28:18–20 (NKJV)

Notice that Jesus doesn’t task the disciples with expanding the kingdom. That’s already been taken care of. His proclamation of all authority means that His kingdom is now complete. There’s nothing left outside of His authority *in heaven and on earth.*

“There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!” — Abraham Kuyper

The leaven has spread through the whole lump.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Is the prospect of studying wonderful, challenging things exciting or intimidating?
2. What are the dangers in using our imagination?
3. What is "the church"?
4. How should we treat the weeds?
5. As sons of the kingdom, what is our job now?

Items for prayer: