

THE PARABLES OF JESUS

The Final Reckoning

In the ancient vision of Isaiah, the prophet was transported into the future and offered a song of exaltation. God had performed what he had planned from the beginning of time (Is. 25:1). All peoples would honor him (25:3), especially the poor for whom God has always demonstrated special compassion and mercy (Is. 25:4-5). A great banquet of celebration would be held for the nations (Is. 25:6), while death, the shroud that comes to all people, would be lifted and destroyed forever (25:7-8a). By a sovereign act, God would remove the grief and disgrace of his redeemed people (25:8b). They would praise him for his wonderful salvation (25:9). This banquet for the nations finds its counterpart in the parables of Jesus about feasts (Mt. 22:1-14; 25:1-13; Lk. 12:35-38; 14:15-24). His references to the "feast of the kingdom of God" are based upon this passage (Mt. 8:11; Lk. 13:29).

FEAST OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

The feast of the kingdom of God represents more than just a meal. It symbolizes the restoration of relationships, the fulfillment of God's covenants, and the joy of eternal life. It serves as a reminder of God's faithfulness and the hope of redemption for all who have put their trust in him. In ordinary Jewish life, festivals were events of remembering God's mighty acts as well as times of thanksgiving. Israel had several such festivals stipulated by the Torah for each calendar year, but the vision of a final feast in the kingdom was the ultimate expression of joy and peace in God's presence forever.

On one occasion, Jesus said that many would come from the east and the west to take their places at this final banquet, sitting with the patriarchs of old in the great climax of the kingdom of God, but the subjects of the kingdom, which is to say, the people of Israel, would be rejected (Mt. 8:10-12). The refusal of Israel's leaders to hear Jesus was captured in the **Parable of the Playing Children** (Mt. 11:16-19; Lk. 7:31-35). Just as children sometimes refused to participate in the make-believe antics of their fellows at public events like weddings or funerals, so the people of Jesus' own generation refused to participate in his call to the kingdom. They had rejected John the Baptist as a demoniac, and they now rejected Jesus as a friend of sinners. Already, Jesus had indicated that the door was narrow, and once the door was closed, no one would be able to enter, no matter how desperately they pled (Lk. 13:22-30). Some who were "first" would be last; some who were "last" would be first. These warnings come to a crescendo in Jesus' parables about the final reckoning.

At one particular dinner, one of the guests who had been listening to Jesus said to him in a sort of pious platitude, "Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God." It was the sort of statement, even though not in the form of a question, that invited comment. In response, Jesus gave the **Parable of the Great Banquet** (Lk. 14:15-24), a parable that said, in effect, that while the religious elites of the Jews were refusing the call to salvation issued by Jesus, the poor and despised were being urged to come. In the parable, the invited guests declined to attend for various shallow personal reasons. Consequently, beggars and the homeless were invited from the village streets. It would not have been difficult for the hearers of the parable to identify themselves as the reluctant guests, for beginning with the preaching of John, the religious elites had consistently resisted the call to repentance (cf. Lk. 7:30; 11:52).

In this parable, there are several elements that are typical of Palestine in the ancient Middle East. The invitation comes from a wealthy man, probably extended to his peers and associates. The act of a double invitation is typical of oriental courtesy.¹ The host must determine the size of the group before he slaughters the animal for meat, and he will decide whether a chicken, a duck, a kid, a sheep, or a calf will be sufficient. The first invitation, then, sets the number of attendees, but once the appropriate animals are selected and the butchering begins, the process cannot be stopped. The meat must be eaten that evening.

The second invitation comes at the hour of the meal. The excuses in Jesus' story are telling, and they are tantamount to insults, especially as they were excuses given at the last moment. Everything was now ready, the animal was butchered, the meat cooked, and the final invitation given—but now, a litany of thin excuses. No one would ever buy a field sight unseen in the Middle East without knowing its full history. The excuse that one of the guests had done so was ludicrous! As for oxen, the wealthy status of the farmer who bought five pair of oxen is clear from the fact



Plowing with a single yoke of oxen

that most farmers usually owned only enough land for one or two yoke of oxen. A farmer buying five yoke was therefore a large landowner. No one in the Middle East would buy a pair of oxen without first seeing them work together, so again, the excuse was a fabrication. The guest who refused to come due to his marriage ostensibly did so in order to avoid leaving his young wife alone (only men were invited to such banquets). However, weddings were community events, and had the wedding been on that particular day, the host would never have scheduled a banquet on the same day. Further, the excuse could not have

been based on the ancient laws concerning military duty (cf. Dt. 20:7; 25:4), for this man was not going to war. Further, banquets were held in mid-afternoon, and the man would have been home that same night. So, his excuse also was flimsy. It is also interesting to observe that Jesus' parable parallels a well-known story of a rich tax collector, a poor scholar, and the staging of a great banquet, a story known to us from the Palestinian Talmud, and it is not unlikely that Jesus deliberately used elements from this famous tale because of its familiarity.

Understandably, the host was furious. All these people had presumably responded positively to the first invitation, but now at the second one, at the very time of the meal, they all offer the thinnest of excuses to be absent. Still, his response is gracious rather than vengeful. He turns to the outcasts of the village, the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame, and since there still was space, he sent invitations even to those outside the village (which in a parable about the kingdom of God, probably refers to Gentiles). None of the original invitees, by their own choice, would ever eat at the banquet feast of God's kingdom, but those they considered to be outsiders would be welcome! The original listeners could hardly have missed the point.

The preceding parable has enough similarities to this **Parable of the Wedding Banquet** (Mt. 22:1-14) that many interpreters have considered them to be the same story, Luke's version

¹ A rabbinic commentary, for instance, indicates that no one would attend a banquet unless invited twice, cf. *Midrash Rabbah Lam. 4:2*.

as edited by Matthew (or Q, as the original version, as edited by both Luke and Matthew but in different ways). I am inclined to think they were separate parables with a common theme. Be that as it may, the story describes invited guests who refused to come to a royal wedding banquet, not only making flimsy excuses to be absent, but mistreating and killing the messengers who went out with the invitations (Mt. 22:1-7). A royal invitation was nothing less than a royal command, and the king exacted severe penalties on the city of these shirkers who had slighted him. Since the invited guests would not come, the king summoned ordinary people from the streets, no matter their condition. One of them, however, came without being appropriately dressed. His clothing was either dirty or inappropriate in some other way, and he was summarily expelled (Mt. 22:8-13). As with the previous parable, those originally invited by God refused his gracious call, so God now called tax-collectors and sinners. Still, even though the invitation now went out to those who were not initially called, it still was incumbent upon them to come dressed appropriately.² Anyone can come, but all who do must attend in a way that is appropriate to the occasion. To attempt to gain entrance any other way results in disaster! The final statement, "Many are called, but few are chosen," means that many are invited to participate in God's rule, but only a few end up belonging to the messianic community of salvation.



Vineyard guard tower

The **Parable of the Wicked Tenants** is found in all three Synoptic Gospels (Mt. 21:33-44; Mk. 12:1-11; Lk. 20:9-18). Here, Jesus' teaching took on an even more ominous tone as it addressed the Jewish leaders' rejection of God's messengers. Further, it pointed ahead to the passion crisis near at hand. The format of the story immediately would recall to the Jewish mind the Song of the Vineyard in Isaiah's prophecy (Is. 5:1-7), a passage that pronounced doom upon the Israelite nation. The imagery of the vineyard, the tower, and the press all comes from this Old Testament song.

In the story, a landowner planted a vineyard. He walled it in to protect the tender shoots from animals (cf. Song 2:15; Ps. 80:12-13), built a press for making wine, and fortified it with a guard tower as protection against thieves. He then leased the vineyard to sharecroppers, who could expect his support until the vineyard began to produce (on the average, in about four years). The venture was long-range, not a quick speculation. At about the time for the initial harvest (probably in the fifth year), the landowner sent a slave to collect some of the produce. The sharecroppers beat this slave and sent him away. Another slave was sent, and he, too, was abused. Still another was sent, and they murdered him. Yet others were sent, only to receive the same treatment. Finally, the landowner sent his son, and the sharecroppers murdered him, throwing his corpse over the wall without even a decent burial. Then comes Jesus' blunt question: what will the vineyard

² On the basis of 2 Kg. 10:22; Isaiah 61:10; Rv. 19:7-8, it is frequently suggested, especially on internet sites, that the host had special robes for the guests to wear, and the man who was without one had simply refused to wear it. Such a wedding garment symbolized honor and respect, and it ensured that all the guests were equally and appropriately dressed. To refuse to wear one would be an insult to the host. However, other interpreters, like the esteemed Aramaic scholar Joachim Jeremias (*Rediscovering the Parables*, p. 52), are doubtful about this interpretation, since there is no clear historical evidence that in the time of Jesus the host provided such robes for guests. Hence, there remains some ambiguity concerning why this man's robe was inappropriate.

owner do? He would severely punish those wicked tenants and rent his vineyard to others. All three Synoptics say plainly that the Jewish leaders understood only too well that this parable was directed toward them (Mt. 21:45; Mk. 12:12; Lk. 20:19)!

The landowner obviously represents God. The sharecroppers were the religious leaders, the vineyard was the people of the land from which God expected fruit, and the slaves were the prophets. The prophets were repeatedly sent to collect fruit from the vineyard, but they were all mistreated or killed. At last, the absentee landowner sent his own son, expecting that the tenants surely would honor him, but they murdered him as well. The death of the landowner's son anticipated Jesus' own rejection and death. Swift retribution would be meted out! The wicked tenants would be executed (probably referring to the coming destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70), and the vineyard would be rented out to other tenants (probably implying the Gentiles).

All the Passover pilgrims would have been well acquainted with Psalm 118, the last of the Egyptian Hallel Psalms and the one from which they chanted in antiphony when Jesus arrived in Jerusalem shortly before Passover. Now, however, Jesus quoted the section from 118:22-23, how that the stone passed over by the masons had finally become the most important one in the building. The landowner's son, whom the tenants were even then rejecting, would ultimately become the prophetic fulfillment of the valuable cornerstone.

In a preface to final story of judgment, the **Parable of the Sheep and Goats** (Mt. 25:31-40), Jesus gave the solemn context "...when the Son of Man comes in his glory." Before him would be assembled the nations whom he will judge, dividing them into those who would inherit God's kingdom and those who would be shut out. The basis for this judgment concerned their treatment of Christ's "brothers," and the final result would be either eternal punishment or eternal life.

The critical interpretive issue concerns the identification of "my brothers," since in showing compassion and benevolence to them, the nations did so to Christ himself. Many Christians have assumed that "my brothers" should be interpreted along the lines of humanitarianism. The centuries of ministry to the poor by the various orders of the church have made this interpretation nearly universal. Without in any way diminishing this necessary aspect of the church's mission to the poor, this interpretation merits reassessment. In the first place, if salvation is based upon philanthropy, then it cannot be based upon grace and faith. In that case, salvation would be purely by good works. More specifically, however, there are significant exegetical reasons for interpreting benevolence to "my brothers" as referring to something other than simply charity.

An alternative based upon Matthew's other usages of the identical construction οἱ ἀδελφοί μου (= "my brothers," cf. Mt. 12:49; 28:10) suggests that Jesus' "brothers" refer to his disciples. His disciples could expect such things as imprisonment, and they were to depend entirely upon the voluntary support of those to whom they ministered. Jesus clearly enunciated that in their mission his disciples would be his personal representatives, for "he who receives you receives me" (Mt. 10:40). Hence, "Jesus brothers" in Matthew's Gospel become a synonym for his disciples as they preached the gospel. To help them when they were hungry and thirsty or to visit them when they were in prison or to house them when they were strangers or to clothe and help them when they were sick was, in effect, to receive them as ambassadors of the gospel of Christ himself.