

The times and seasons of the gospel

by Douglas E. Cox

In the gospel, many of the truths connected with God's purpose and the plan of salvation are represented by various natural phenomena, such as day and night, and the seasons. Jesus described the time of his ministry as "day," but he said that night would come. He said, "I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work." [John 9:4]

A day is divided into hours artificially. The division of the day into periods of darkness and light, or night and day is a natural one.

Paul described the saints as coming out of darkness into the light of day. He wrote: "The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light." [Romans 13:12]

He said believers are "children of the day" and so implied that unbelievers were of the night. "Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness." [1 Thessalonians 5:5]

The apostle Peter also described the saints as in darkness, watching for the dawn. He said prophecy is a light that shines in a dark place, until the light of day dawns in our hearts. "We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts." [2 Peter 1:19]

Thus, understanding the gospel message is represented by the light of day,

and in the New Testament, the gospel itself is represented by the sun. For example, the church is represented by a woman "clothed with the sun" in Revelation 12:1.

Jesus said when the tares are removed from the wheat at the harvest, "Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father." [Matthew 13:43]

Days, months, and years are natural, but not the seven day week. The weekly sabbath day was established when the Israelites were in the wilderness, after the exodus. The people were instructed to gather manna each day, and on the sixth day, gather for two days. Those who went out to gather on the seventh day found none. [Exodus 16:23, 27] The teaching of Jesus, when he said to flee to the mountains, and to pray that our flight is not on the sabbath day, may allude to this. The spiritual manna is available in the present age; don't expect to gather it on the seventh day. In other words, seek the kingdom of God in this age, rather than in the judgment that follows. The kingdom of God is one of the "mountains" that he meant we should seek, and flee to.

The seasons in a single year are referred to metaphorically in the gospel. The year is associated with seven through the seven annual holy days. These days occur on specific days in certain months, except for the day of Pentecost, which is determined by calculation, probably so that it always fell on a certain day of the week. [Leviticus 23:15-16] But in Jewish practice, Pentecost may fall on any day of the week.

The seven holy days are:

1. First day of Unleavened Bread
2. Seventh day of Unleavened Bread
3. Pentecost
4. Feast of Trumpets
5. Day of Atonement
6. Feast of Tabernacles
7. Last Great Day

Moses declared that the year began in the spring. The month of the exodus from Egypt was to be the first month of the year. [Exodus 12:2]

The crucifixion of Jesus occurred on the day of the passover, just before the first annual holy day. Jesus is the true Lamb of God, which is prefigured by the sacrifice of the passover lamb in the Old Testament.

The holy Spirit was sent to the disciples on the day of Pentecost that followed Jesus' crucifixion, burial, and resurrection. Events in the New Testament period correspond to the spring season, which is followed by summer. The holy days of the fall season occur in the seventh month. They are more connected with the end of the age. In between, corresponding to the church age, is the summer season.

In the parable of the sower in Luke 8:5-15, the saints are compared to wheat. The parable of the tares pictures both wheat and tares growing together till the harvest, which occurs at the end of the world. [Matthew 13:39] This fits the idea that the sequence of seasons over one year is a metaphor and a type of the gospel. The parable of the corn in Mark 4:26-29 says the harvest is reaped when the fruit is brought forth.

George H. Warnock (1917-2007) proposed that the Jewish feasts were symbolic of the church's experience; he said that the first three feast days depict events in the first century, and the last four depict events at the end of the age which are yet to be fulfilled. He believed that the Feast of Tabernacles would be fulfilled by an outpouring of the Spirit upon the church, called the 'latter rain.' [1]

Isaiah referred to the ministry of Jesus, who would proclaim "the acceptable year of the Lord." His parables about sowing, planting and harvest, seasons, etc., all have to do with the gospel age, which is the time for salvation. Isaiah wrote:

Isaiah 61:1-3

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound;
To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn;
To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he might be glorified.

In three prophecies, including Isaiah 61:2 quoted above, and the following two verses, Isaiah connects "day" and "year," showing that the year is a symbolic one. In each case, "day" refers to the time of God's vengeance.

Isaiah 34:8

For it is the day of the LORD's vengeance, and the year of recompences for the controversy of Zion.

Isaiah 63:4

For the day of vengeance is in mine heart, and the year of my redeemed is come.

In the parables of Jesus, the summer season corresponds to the church age. Believers are compared to plants such as wheat, that grow from seeds planted in the spring, mature in summer, and that are harvested in the fall. The saints are encouraged to endure till the harvest, and be fruitful.

James referred to the farmer who patiently waits for his fruit and produce to ripen.

James 5:7-8

Be patient therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord. Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain. Be ye also patient; stablish your hearts: for the coming of the Lord draweth nigh.

The word of God is compared to rain in Isaiah 55:10-11. Humanity in general is compared to grass. [Psalm 37:1-3] Isaiah said, "surely the people is grass." [Isaiah 40:7]

The apostle Peter quotes these scriptures from Isaiah that compare humans to grass. The metaphor depicts the human lifespan as brief. He wrote:

1 Peter 1:24-25

For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: But the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you."

In the book of Revelation, John refers to the remaining time of the church as "a little season." At the opening of the 5th seal, the saints who were slain for the word of God and their testimony rest yet for a little season; the time remaining to the judgment. [Revelation 6:9-11] For them, it would seem like an instant.

Similarly, in Revelation 20:1-3, after the thousand years when Satan is bound, he is loosed for "a little season." Satan was bound in a bottomless pit in the age of the apostles, but he ascends from the pit, when Christians depart from the faith and give heed to his deceptions. [Revelation 11:7] They are the stars drawn by the tail of the dragon in Revelation 12:4, who are cast to the earth.

Summer is the season for the saints to bring forth the fruit of the gospel in their lives. It is called a "little season." Jesus gave a parable to emphasize this.

Mark 13:27-29

Now learn a parable of the fig tree; When her branch is yet tender, and putteth forth leaves, ye know that summer is near: So ye in like manner, when ye shall see these things come to pass, know that it is nigh, even at the doors.

When he said, "And pray ye that your flight be not in the winter," [Mark 13:18] Jesus did not mean flee to preserve your own life, as he also said, "For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it." [Mark 8:35]

When Jesus said "let them that be in Judaea flee to the mountains" in Mark 13:14, he was speaking of fleeing to metaphorical mountains, which are symbolic of God's promises. Jesus taught that we need to pray and seek to be part of the *harvest* of the saints that will be reaped in the fall. To have to flee in winter means missing out on that harvest, and so having to endure the judgment, which is described as "great tribulation."

References

1. George H. Warnock. The Feast Of Tabernacles