

LEAVEN (OR YEAST)

Background

Leaven (or yeast) is a substance added to dough to make it ferment and rise. Only a small quantity is required for this purpose. The use of leaven in the making of bread was known to the ancient Hebrews. Leavening took time and was of no use when there was a need to make a hurried meal. From the earliest times the Hebrews attached spiritual meaning to leaven and associated the leavening process with creeping corruption. Even the smallest quantity was forbidden in Jewish houses at the time of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which followed on from the Feast of Passover and which represented the requirement of the redeemed to live holy lives in communion with God and the covenant community.

Nor could it be in any offering which pointed forward to the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ, the sinless Lamb of God. In the Old Testament the presence of 'leaven' often suggests evil.

Genesis **19:1–3** (cf. **18:6**); Exodus **12:8, 11; 12:14–15, 34–39; 13:3, 6–7; 23:18**; Leviticus **2:11; 6:17; 10:12; 23:6–8**; Numbers **6:13–20**; Deuteronomy **16:3–8**; Judges **6:19–22**; Hosea **7:4**

The New Testament

In the New Testament, leaven is often associated symbolically with false teaching and hypocrisy – an outward faith that has no corresponding inner reality. Jesus warns against the leaven of the Pharisees and others. Just as leaven works in a hidden way to permeate the dough and increase its mass, so corruption can be an unheeded process which gradually spreads and bloats.

However, we also note that Jesus uses the picture of leaven to help explain the meaning of the kingdom (see Matthew **13:33**; Luke **13:20–21**). This parable of the kingdom is in the context of pictures of growth. The kingdom will spread as yeast makes the dough grow.

The New Testament made it clear that false teaching and influences would infiltrate and adulterate the organised 'church'. Institutionally, it would become bloated in time by many nominal adherents (some 'members' not truly belonging to Christ) and by much external 'religion'.

Christians should be wary of the spread of corrupting elements and seek to live holy lives as the true redeemed of the Lord.

Matthew **16:6, 11–12**; Mark **8:15**; Luke **12:1–3; 13:20–21**; 1 Corinthians **5:6–13**; Galatians **5:7–9** (cf. also 2 Corinthians **7:1**; 2 Timothy **4:3–4**; 2 Peter **2:1–2**)