

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT MYSTERIES

Part X

by Thomas Ice

“The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has, and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls, and upon finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had, and bought it.”

—Matthew 13:44–46

The parables of “the hidden treasure” (Matt. 13:44) and “the pearl of great price” (13:45–46) appear to many to constitute a pair related in some way. These parables are the first two not spoken publicly but only to the disciples in private. Jesus uses the introductory formula “the kingdom of heaven is like . . .” It is likely there is a connection between Jesus’ quotation of Psalm 78:2 in Matthew 13:35 and 13:44 since both use the word “hidden.” “So that what was spoken through the prophet might be fulfilled, say, ‘I will open My mouth in parables; I will utter things *hidden* since the foundation of the world’” (13:35, emphasis added).

Mark Bailey supports the view that the two parables go together by noting five points linking the pair.

The parables of the hidden treasure and of the pearl merchant are parallel in five ways: a reference to something of value, the finding, the going, the selling all one has, and the buying. They also have some significant differences. The treasure parable speaks of hiding, joy, and the location of the treasure that is found and hidden again in a field. It also contains historic-present tenses (“goes,” “buys,” and “sells”), whereas the pearl merchant parable has all these verbs in the past (“went,” “sold,” and “bought”). In the first the discovery is accidental, while in the second the person was in the business for just such a find. Obviously, then, the parables, while similar, are not the same, as some have suggested.¹

Bailey’s observations appear to be correct. I hope to support this notion below.

THE TREASURE HIDDEN

The main interpretative issue in this parable is to what does the treasure refer. There are many who think the treasure refers to Christ and the sinner is to sell all he has in order to obtain Christ. While Christ is certainly the greatest treasure one can gain, we as sinners have nothing to offer to get Christ. His salvation is a total gift. That popular view does not fit the details of this parable. I think the traditional dispensational interpretation makes the best sense and it is that the treasure refers to Israel. The Lord calls Israel His treasure: “Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine” (Ex. 19:5). “For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; and the LORD has chosen you to be a people for His own possession [treasure] out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth” (Deut. 14:2). The Psalmist says, “For the LORD has chosen Jacob for Himself, Israel for His own possession” (Ps. 135:4).

John Walvoord provides an excellent explanation as follows:

The fact that Israel is a treasure not recognized by the world and therefore hidden is all too evident today. . . . Jesus came with a special purpose of redeeming Israel, although at the same time He reconciled the world unto Himself. It was Jesus, therefore, who sold all that He had in order to buy the treasure, Israel, and to purchase it with His own blood (Phil 2:7–8; 1 Pe 1:18–19). During the present age, Israel is a hidden entity in the world, only to emerge at the end of the age as a major factor in the prophetic fulfillment leading up to the second coming of Christ.²

The field is the world, as we have already learned from the parable of the sower in 13:36. This parable pictures the treasure, which is Israel, who was purchased from the world and then hidden again, which refers to the nation in the diaspora in the current age. Christ paid the price for their sin at His first coming but was rejected, therefore, they were hidden or scattered throughout the world among the nations. As Walvoord notes they will be redeemed at the end of this current age, as depicted by a later parable, the parable of dragnet (13:47–50). “He has purchased His earthly people,” explains Arno Gaebelein. “They shall be yet his peculiar treasure, displaying in the earth, in the coming age, all the excellencies of Himself. They will be justified, a separated and Spirit-filled people.”³

The mystery taught by this parable is “that while most of Israel rejected the Messiah, nevertheless, God will gain a remnant from Israel. The treasure thus is the Remnant of Israel.”⁴ Since these parables focus on the interim period (church age and tribulation) between the two comings of Christ, this will be a time where Israel will be scattered throughout the world but a remnant will still be sought and saved.

THE PEARL OF GREAT PRICE

Stan Toussaint observes that, “The interpretation of this parable is contingent upon the identification of the precious pearl. It seems that the pearl pictures the true church of Jesus Christ.”⁵ This similar but different parable shifts the focus from Israel to the church during the interim age between the two comings of Christ. We have a similar salvific emphasis but this time the pearl of great price speaks of the church. “In the world of gems, the pearl is uniquely formed organically. Its formation occurs because of an irritation in the side of an oyster,” according to Walvoord. “There is a sense in which the church was formed out of the wounds of Christ and has been made possible by His death and sacrifice.”⁶

In the New Testament the church is pictured as a single organism that is alive and growing, which is why a pearl is selected by our Lord to represent the as yet unrevealed church. Christ made both Jewish and Gentile believers into a single saved entity called the church as noted by the Apostle Paul. “For He Himself is our peace, who made both *groups into one*, and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, *which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances*, that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, *thus establishing peace*, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity” (Eph. 2:14–16). Paul not only teaches that the church is a single entity, like a pearl, but it is also a growing organism, which also fits the characteristic of a pearl. He says, “having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner *stone*, in whom the whole building, being fitted together is growing into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are being built together into a

dwelling of God in the Spirit” (Eph. 2:20–22). Paul further teaches, “Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her” (Eph. 5:25). As Gaebelein notes, “Like a pearl, the church is *one*, though composed of many countless members known to Him alone. This one pearl is *still* forming out of His side.”⁷

Fruchtenbaum provides some insight to this parable as follows:

While the Bible reveals that the *treasure* represents Israel, it does not state anywhere exactly what *the pearl* represents when it is used symbolically. Knowing that Christendom includes both Jews and Gentiles, very likely the parable of *the pearl of great price* is “the other side of the coin” of the parable of the *treasure*. The *treasure* represents the Jews, so it is natural that *the pearl* would represent the Gentiles. Furthermore, the pearl comes from the sea, and the sea symbolizes the Gentile world (Dan. 7:2–3; Rev. 17:1, 15). Finally, the pearl comes from the oyster, which itself was unclean in the Law of Moses but made clean by the Law of Messiah.⁸

“As with the hidden treasure, the revelation of the pearl occurs at the second coming of Christ to establish His kingdom on earth,” declares Toussaint. “The mystery revealed is the formation of a new body which also would inherit the kingdom (Ephesians 3:3–6). The pearl being a product of the sea may infer that this group would be taken from the nations of the earth (Matthew 28:19–20).”⁹

CONCLUSION

It must be kept in mind that all these parables relate to the postponement of the kingdom in light of first century rejection of their Messiah as a nation. Walvoord provides an apt summary of the purpose for the two parables that form a pair as follows:

In the treasure and the pearl are the two major purposes of God for Israel and the church from a spiritual point of view, and His purposes for both are realized, even though there is the dual line of development of good and evil culminating in the second coming of Christ.¹⁰

Therefore, we have seen a glimpse of God’s plan for Israel and the church during the present interadvent age through these two parables. Maranatha!

(To Be Continued . . .)

ENDNOTES

⁷ Mark L. Bailey, “The Parables of the Hidden Treasure and of the Pearl Merchant,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* (vol. 156, no. 622; April 1999), p. 176.

⁸ John F. Walvoord, *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), p. 105.

⁹ Arno C. Gaebelein, *The Gospel of Matthew: An Exposition* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1961), p. 299.

¹⁰ Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *The Footsteps of the Messiah: A Study of the Sequence of Prophetic Events* (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 2003), p. 676.

¹¹ Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold The King: A Study of Matthew* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1980), p. 184.

¹² Walvoord, *Matthew*, p. 105.

¹³ Gaebelein, *Matthew*, pp. 300–01. (emphasis original)

⁸ Fruchtenbaum, *Footsteps of the Messiah*, p. 676. (emphasis original)

⁹ Toussaint, *Behold The King*, p. 184.

¹⁰ Walvoord, *Matthew*, p. 106.