

THE CASE OF THE BURIED TREASURE

by Ray C. Stedman

In the great series of parables in Matthew 13 our Lord gave us, as he said, "The secrets of the kingdom of heaven." The kingdom of heaven is God's work among men, God's rule and authority in the midst of human affairs. In this series Jesus is revealing the work of the kingdom as it is going on throughout the centuries of this present age since his first coming and before his return. We come to the fifth parable this morning, the parable of the buried treasure.

I don't know what that may evoke in your mind. It always reminds me immediately of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, of Long John Silver, and doubloons and pieces-of-eight, pegleg pirates, and all the exciting things usually associated with the idea of buried treasure. It is intriguing to realize that Scripture deals with this subject as well. It recognizes the allure and the mystery which always gathers around the notion of hidden treasure. God has his buried treasures and he is speaking of them in this parable.

But the exciting thing about Scripture is that in it we are always dealing with fact, not fancy. These parables afford us a glimpse behind the scenes of history into factors and forces which are at work today but which we would never find reported on the pages of the newspaper. And yet they are extremely controlling of human events. Through the pages of the Word of God we are afforded tremendous insights into life. I hope you never open your Bibles without the sense that here is a book which gives you vital, inside information which you can get from no other source and which will help you to understand yourself, and life, and the mystery of history, more than you possibly could in any other way.

The first four parables, at which we have already looked, were delivered by the Sea of Galilee on a single memorable occasion when Jesus spoke to a great crowd who gathered about him. The crowd was large that he moved out from shore in a boat to be able to speak to them and teach them these parables. But we need to recognize that the parable of the treasure hidden in the field is the first of a series of three which our Lord gave in connection with the other four and on the same day, but, as Matthew is careful to tell us, he gave these to the disciples alone after they had gone back into the house. They are part of the whole series of seven, but they were given only to the disciples, and there is something significant about that.

The first four stories were given to the unbelieving seaside crowd. They concern those aspects of the kingdom of heaven at work among men which are readily recognizable and visible in history. But these last three were spoken only to the men of faith, the disciples, who were ready to believe what God said. They concern things which are not quite as easily seen in the historical process.

You remember that in the first parable our Lord informed us by means of the story that he would engage in a great sowing of the Word of God throughout the world and that it would fall on four kinds of hearts. There would be a partial failure of the seed of the Word because of the conditions of some of the hearts into which it fell. But there would be one kind of heart in which the seed would grow up into a harvest and produce fruit.

Then, building on that, in the second parable the Lord said that he would take the sons of the kingdom, who are produced by the seed of the Word, and sow them like wheat throughout the world. He has been at work ever since, sending men into all parts of the earth and into all levels of society, among all kinds of people, putting them there in order that there may be a testimony of the Word. But in that same parable he said that an enemy would come and sow tares, or weeds, and that these would grow up right alongside the wheat. So, through the course of history, there has been a counterfeit Christianity, a sham religion, a phony, a fake, which bears the name of Christianity but which is absolutely false. These two would grow up together and sometimes would be difficult to distinguish, especially at the beginning, but eventually would make their real

nature known. This has certainly proved true in history.

And then our Lord said in the third parable that there would be an abnormal and an unnatural growth of the seed that he planted. It would grow into an ungainly tree with many great branches, a powerful, prestigious structure that would attract birds of prey, evil men who would come into the church and build their nests there, i.e., establish their authority there, and thus would produce something entirely different than the effective, pungent, but low-profile approach to humanity that the Lord desired.

Finally, there was the parable of the woman who took leaven and introduced it into the three measures of meal, by which Jesus made clear that something would destroy the precious fellowship of the people of God and that it would be allowed into the church by the very people who were appointed to keep it out. All this has happened exactly as our Lord said and all of it is visible in history.

Now we turn to these three private parables given to the disciples:

- The parable of the hidden treasure,
- The parable of the pearl of great price, and
- The parable of the dragnet.

I want to read these twin parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price because they link so closely together, although we will look only at the first one this morning. In Verses 44 and 45 Jesus says,

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it. {Matt 13:44-46 RSV}

You can see that these parables are very much alike. They each have the element of a man who discovers something valuable and sells all that he has and buys it. They fit together but they are not talking about exactly the same thing.

A great misinterpretation of these parables has developed, quite without any basis in the systematic interpretation of symbols in Scripture, which has hidden their true meaning. (As we saw last time, the parable of the leaven also has been misconstrued to mean something quite different from what our Lord ever intended.) The usual interpretation of these parables is that Christ is the hidden treasure and that he is the pearl of great price. And as we go through life we are the people who some day discover him. Then it is up to us to sell all that we have, give it all up, and buy him at any cost. But I submit to you that that is false, and obviously so. Never, anywhere in Scripture is salvation ever offered to us as something we have to buy, or can buy. We are absolute paupers in God's sight. We have nothing to offer him, nothing that we can give in return. Salvation is offered to us as a free gift, entirely by the grace of God. No one can ever give all that he has in order to purchase Jesus Christ because he has nothing to give in the first place. Therefore, we will not spend any more time on that misinterpretation, but will come right to the heart of what the story of the treasure hidden in the field really means.

Notice that there are two things in this story which are immediately recognizable because we have had them before. There is a man, and there is a field. So we already have clues as to what these mean.

- The man in these parables is always Jesus himself. He has previously identified himself as the central figure.
- And the field, he has told us, is the world, the world of humanity, the human race, all of society.

With these clues that our Lord himself has given us, we now have the key to the understanding of this parable. Jesus came, he says, and found a treasure hidden in humanity. Something was hidden, lost in the human race, but he uncovered it. And then he did an amazing thing. He covered it up again, buried it again. Then he went

and gave all that he had and bought that field of humanity.

Immediately we are asking ourselves, "What is this treasure?" That is what our Lord wants us to ask. One of the fascinating things about studying Scripture, especially in a series of parables, is to try to answer questions like that -- to seek to fit the puzzle of the parable to the pattern of life, and see where they correspond. Something is hidden in the world. It was hidden when our Lord came. He uncovered it but buried it again, and now it is hidden once more. And there it remains until our Lord's return. Now, what is it?

Well, is it not obvious that there is something lost with relation to humanity, something every human being seems to be seeking, consciously or unconsciously, something every thinking person in this room and throughout the world is searching for and longing for with an ache that is almost physical? Men have dreamed of finding it for centuries. They have erected great organizations to try to bring it about, to produce this hidden treasure. The United Nations exists for this very purpose. The Communists claim that they have found it. Western democracies say that they have found it. But it is very evident that neither has found this secret. What would it be?

The treasure is the secret of international peace, of harmony among the nations. You see, as our Lord indicates, it is something related to the field, to humanity. And it is hidden within that human field so that Jesus had to buy the field in order to get the treasure. That treasure is the lost secret of how to get along with other nations, how to discover peace and prosperity and happiness and all the many results of peace that men have been seeking after for centuries.

This week I was talking with Bill Gwinn, the director of Mt. Hermon Christian Conference Center. He had been in Washington, D. C., spending some time with a young congressman who is a mutual friend of ours. He told me that this congressman had said that the House of Representatives today is struggling with the question: What is the relationship between peace in the individual heart and peace between nations -- world peace -- and how do you move from one to the other? They know there is some kind of tie between them, but they don't know what it is. This congressman said that Congress is really wrestling with this issue. He himself is deeply involved in it. (You see, congressmen don't spend all their time smoking cigars and kissing babies.) The word *peace* is on everyone's lips today. There are banners and placards everywhere you go in America, crying out for peace. And Congress is trying to put its finger on where you begin and how you relate peace of heart in an individual to peace among men. How do you find this secret?

I was reminded by that conversation of the words of the Secretary General of the United Nations, U Thant. Some time ago, in addressing a crowd of 2,500 delegates from 57 countries of the world who were trying to find some way to world peace, he said these remarkable words:

"What element is lacking so that with all our skill and all our knowledge we still find ourselves in the dark valley of discord and enmity? What is it that inhibits us from going forward together to enjoy the fruits of human endeavor and to reap the harvest of human experience? Why is it that for all our professed ideals, our hopes, and our skills, peace on earth is still a distant objective seen only dimly through the storms and turmoils of our present difficulties?"

There is an honest cry from the harassed heart of a statesman who is desperately trying to find the treasure that is hidden in man, the secret of world peace.

If you want to put that treasure into one word, as revealed by the Scriptures, that word is *Israel*, the nation of Israel. I am sure that these disciples understood this because they were Jews themselves, and they knew their people's history, and what the Old Testament revealed about them. These were men of the Word, and when our Lord spoke this parable, they would clearly remember the words of Exodus 19. God is speaking to this nation which he has given the Law and he says,

"Now therefore, if you will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then you shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people:" {cf, Exod 19:5a KJV}

And they would remember the words of Psalm 135:4:

For the Lord hath chosen Jacob [another name for Israel] unto himself ... for his peculiar treasure. {cf, Psa 135:4 KJV}

You need only read the book of Deuteronomy to know that God set aside this people, the Jews, in order that they should be a showcase of theocracy to all the other nations of the world. We speak of the Jews as "the chosen people," and unfortunately a very grave misconception of that phrase has arisen. Even the Jewish people themselves misunderstand it to a large degree. Usually people take it to mean that God has chosen the Jews for a special destiny, to mean that they are to have special and uniquely privileged treatment, different than any other nation enjoys. But such is not the case; God did not choose Israel for that purpose. He chose them to be a representative nation, to be a working model of what a nation ought to be, in order that other nations might share that knowledge. He set them out as a sample, an example nation, to indicate by visible demonstration what God wants to be and to do with all the other nations of the world. Israel, therefore is not a unique, select people, but rather is a people chosen to demonstrate the kind of relationship that God wants to have with every other people on earth. They are intended to demonstrate how any nation can be blessed and fulfilled and find prosperity and peace and harmony and happiness if they discover the secret of their relationship to God.

That is Israel's purpose and there was a time in their developing history when it was partially fulfilled. In the days of David and Solomon there was a demonstration to the world of their day of what God would do with a nation which was in right relationship with him. It was a partial demonstration, never complete, never full. But even that partial realization was a magnificent model of what God could do with any nation. In the days of David, and especially in those of Solomon who followed, the world beat a path to Israel to see what God was doing.

You remember the story of the Queen of Sheba who, as Jesus had said earlier this very day, came "from the ends of the earth" {cf, Matt 12:42} because she had heard of Solomon's glory and she wanted to find the secret of this man's prestige and power and wisdom and majesty. She was no inconsiderable monarch herself. She wasn't just Queen for a Day. She was a great queen in her own right. And she brought with her a great retinue bearing exotic spices, gold, silver, precious stones, beautiful cloth, an amazing array of presents for King Solomon. These were the best she had to offer. But when King Solomon met her he began to give presents to her, and his outweighed hers by far. She reviewed all the glories of the kingdom of Solomon and was amazed and staggered by what she saw. Then she asked him for the secret and Solomon took her to the temple and there he showed her the worship of Jehovah, showed her how this nation was related to the God of glory and that it was their understanding of God which produced the magnificence she had seen. And the queen's heart melted and she said, "I didn't believe the reports until I had seen all this with my own eyes, but the half has never been told me," {cf, 1 Ki 10:7}.

Now that is God's plan for the nations -- to provide a working model in the nation Israel. This is what we human beings need. We never can understand anything until we see it demonstrated before us. That is why it is not enough to preach the gospel to people; you must also live it. It is not enough to mouth great words like love and joy and peace and forgiveness; you also have to demonstrate them, or people will never believe the gospel, never accept it, never receive it.

So the secret of world peace is wrapped up, bound up, in this strange nation, Israel. Only when Israel comes again into its right relationship to God is it ever possible to have world peace. I hope that this is clear to the many of you, especially those of you who are younger, who are earnestly and zealously and quite dedicatedly trying to pursue world peace. It is right that you should pursue it. Nations are right to try to solve their problems and reconcile their differences. There is nothing wrong with that at all. But, nevertheless, the Scriptures tell us that the secret is hidden from men until it be revealed through Israel.

When our Lord came into the world and came to Israel he found that this treasure had been lost to the world. For more than four hundred years Israel had been an obscure, tiny little nation. There was no voice of God in their midst, no prophet speaking forth from God. The nation's glory was gone. It was now subject to the Romans, crushed under the heel of an iron-hearted oppressor. And our Lord found the nation in bondage, the temple overrun with moneychangers, commercial charlatans making a fast buck by preying upon the worship

of the people. He found poverty and misery stalking the land.

When he found it, what did he do? He uncovered it. That is the story of the gospels. He revealed for a brief flash of time the glory that was Israel. He declared it in great messages like the *Sermon on the Mount*. And then he demonstrated it by healing the multitudes, by driving the moneychangers out of the temple, by feeding the thousands with bread and fish, and by rebuking death and evil everywhere he went. In the short course of the three and a half years of our Lord's ministry he uncovered the treasure of Israel, the secret of this nation's life.

But you know what happened. The nation would not have it, would not have him, and they rejected him. So according to the parable he hid the treasure again. You cannot read the Gospel stories without seeing that there came a time in our Lord's ministry when he began to change his message and turn away from the proclamation that the kingdom of heaven was at hand, that he was there in their midst. As opposition began to mount against him and resistance to his message increased, our Lord withdrew from Jerusalem and went out into the desert. He refused to go into the capital city again until his appointed hour had come. And the crowds who had followed him, the multitudes who had hung upon his words faded away. "Many turned back," the record says, "and no longer walked with him," {cf, John 6:66}.

Eventually he came again into the city and there he pronounced solemn and serious words of judgment against the nation. You can read them in Matthew 23 in the sharp series of woes that he pronounced against the Pharisees and the scribes. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" he said {Matt 23:13, et al}. Earlier he had pronounced judgment on the outlying cities: "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! -- for if the miracles done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon [which were pagan communities], they would have repented long ago. But you have refused," {cf, Matt 11:21, Luke 10:13}.

Jesus had entered Jerusalem in what we call the triumphal entry. He would never have called it that. He went into the city riding upon an ass in fulfillment of the prophecy of Zechariah, "Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass," {cf, Matt 21:5, Zech 9:9}. Instead of being received by the rulers and leaders of the people he was rejected. A crowd of children and humble folk were the only ones who recognized him and went ahead of him waving palm branches and crying, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" {cf, Matt 21:9, Mark 11:9, John 12:13}. He lamented over this recalcitrant city and said, "O Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!'" {cf, Matt 23:37, Luke 13:34}.

Then, as you can read in Mark's Gospel, our Lord went into the temple and he stopped the sacrifices. He ended them, and then he said to the people, "The kingdom of God shall be taken from you and given to a nation that will bring forth the fruits of it," {cf, Matt 21:43}. By that he indicated that the privilege of demonstrating the grace of God would be taken from Israel and given to the church. The church would thereafter demonstrate before men the healing grace of God as we will see in our next study together. Finally Jesus left the city once more and went out to his death.

But the wonderful thing the Lord tells us here is that he has not given up his purpose. God has not forgotten Israel. In this little parable he reveals that he came and found this treasure, the secret of world peace and prosperity, hidden in this nation. Yet they had lost the secret of their own lives. So he unfolded it and unveiled it again. Then he covered it over again when it was rejected by the people. But then the parable says, "Then in his joy the man went and gave all that he had and bought the field." And in those words, "he gave all that he had," the mystery of the darkness of the cross of Jesus Christ is implied. They bring to mind the words of Philippians 2: "Though he was equal with God he did not count it a thing to be held on to But he emptied himself, disenfranchised himself, pauperized himself -- he gave all that he had -- and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross," {cf, Phil 2:8}.

In the dying of Jesus there, one element of what was accomplished was that he might finally purchase the right to set Israel again among the nations as a model nation so that the world might learn how to live in peace. And in that we can see revealed the heart of God who looks at this broken and fragmented world, with all its

injustice, heartache, sorrow, violence, and slaughter, and yet has not forgotten his purposes and has preserved the secret of world peace in a treasure hidden among the nations which he shall someday bring forth again.

Yesterday I spent a few hours with Dr. Billy Graham. He was in Israel not long ago. And he was telling me how divided among themselves the Israelis are and how they are separating into squabbling bickering groups, fighting each other, and into many political parties vying for power. Though they are surrounded and ringed by enemies armed to the teeth who are vowing to wipe every Jew off the face of the earth, Nevertheless, as is obvious, they do not understand the secret of their own life and are trying to produce peace and stability by democratic methods and consensus and compromise. They have not yet grasped again the lost secret of their nation -- that the nation which walks in right relationship to him, God will heal.

I have never forgotten something I learned years ago when in Hawaii. It is recorded in the motto of that fiftieth state. This motto is a result of the work of the early Christian missionaries who came from New England in the 19th century. It is: *Ua mau ke ea o ka aina ika pono* , which I am sure you understand means, "The life of the land is preserved by righteousness." And you and I are making a great mistake if, as Americans, we think that this country is being held together by the Constitution of the United States or by the Declaration of Independence. Thank God for those documents, but they have no power to hold us together as a people, to preserve our national liberties or our national life. The life of this land, like that of any other land, is preserved by righteousness. That means obedience. That means a recognition of his healing power, and of the fact forgiveness is available for all the injuries and mistakes and wrong doings of our past. That means a change of mind, repentance, turning again to God and recognizing his presence in our midst. That is what keeps a nation strong. If our country forgets that, it will lose its ability to stand as a nation among the other nations of the world.

And the nations of earth will never learn this righteousness finally, until Israel stands once again as a nation before God, recognizing the presence of God in their midst and providing a working model of how every nation ultimately shall be run by the provision and power of God. This parable tells us that. Our Lord came and he bought the whole field so that someday he might use the treasure hidden in it to make the world blossom with glory.

This is what Paul tells us in the ninth, tenth, and eleventh chapters of Romans. You will never understand what God is doing in history unless you understand those three chapters because they make clear God's relationship with this strange and wonderful people, Israel. There Paul too tells us that God is not through with Israel. He has but hidden them away again.

For 1900 years Israel was utterly lost among the nations, dispersed. When our Lord covered the treasure over it was hidden completely in the field of humanity again. But in our own time we are facing an amazing wonder, one of the most remarkable things that has ever taken place in the annals of men, and one of the most dramatic demonstrations of the truth of the Word of God! God has gathered this nation together again, brought in the people from the outlying countries of the world, gathered his dispersed from the four corners of the earth, and brought them back into the land. There they stand ready, being prepared right now to discover again, finally, the secret of their life. They have not found it yet. But when they do, Paul tells us, they will cause the earth to blossom and the world will move into its promised inheritance. Listen to these words from Romans 11. Paul says of Israel,

So I ask, have they stumbled so as to fall? [That is, Israel had obviously stumbled at that time, but have they fallen completely?] **By no means! But through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous.** [That is, when God set Israel aside, he allowed his delivering word to go out directly to Gentile peoples everywhere so that they might be the visible demonstration of how God can heal and fulfill human life, and Israel was watching -- at least individual Jews have been, all along.] **Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!** [That is, when Israel comes back into its right relationship with God, how much more blessing will this world understand and realize when they see worked out before their eyes what a nation can be with God in its midst!] {Rom 11:11-14 RSV}

And in Verse 15 Paul says,

For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead? {Rom 11:15 RSV}

This is a dream and a vision that men have long held. Politicians have struggled for centuries to try to find the secret of world peace. Years ago I was struck by the closing words of a great address that Winston Churchill gave at Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1950:

What prizes lie before all the people if they are worthy of them: peace, food, happiness, leisure, wealth for the masses never known nor dreamed of, the glorious advance into a period of rest and safety for all the hundreds of millions of homes where little children play by the fire, and girls grow up in all their beauty, and young men strive and win in the free enterprise of life. Around us the storms may gather, but let us not shut out the hope that the burdens of fear and want may be lifted for a glorious era from the bruised and weary shoulders of mankind.

What a beautiful dream. But is it only a dream? No! The Lord Jesus says that he came and uncovered for a brief time the secret of world peace and prosperity. But he hid it again. And then he went and gave all that he had and bought the field in which it is hidden. God is in control. He bought the field in order that someday he might use that treasure to cause the whole world to blossom and to fill the earth with peace and happiness. When the world sees again a visible manifestation of what God intends a nation to do, then the nations will learn world peace. They will come and study this little nation of Israel in which the secret of world peace has always been hidden, the strange, chosen nation for which our Lord gave his life.

And do you know that all this is not without its application to us as individuals as well? For Israel, even in rejection, even in failure, is still an example to the people of the world. If you want to see how God will act with you as an individual then look at the way he has been acting with Israel as a nation. This is why this nation is here. It is a visible example to all mankind of the way God deals with humanity.

So, if there are some among us here, who, like Israel, have temporarily turned away from God and have been walking away from him, who may, like Israel, once have had sweet fellowship with the Lord but lately have been resisting, have turned aside and gone back, have lost faith and now are wandering in perplexity, puzzlement, and bewilderment, in obscurity, weakness, and defeat, nevertheless God's promises to you are just as sure as they are to Israel. God has said that if you will turn back to him, as Israel will some day, he stands ready to heal, ready to forgive, ready to wipe out all the failures, all the transgressions, and to begin in your experience to cause your life to blossom and to come into abundance.

If there is anyone here in that condition, remember that this is God's promise to you, and that he has given a visible demonstration in the life of this nation.

Next week we will go on to see how this parable ties very closely with the next one, the parable of the pearl of great price.

In these two parables our Lord is telling us the reasons for the cross. The pearl is different than the treasure, and yet for both the Lord gave all that he had.

Prayer

Our heavenly Father, how we thank you for the marvelous truth that you, Lord, have bought the world, that it belongs to you, and that you shall some day rule and reign in power and glory in its midst and all your promises shall be fulfilled. We pray, Lord Jesus, that we may all apply this to our lives, and that we may understand that you desire to heal us and bring us right now into an experience of joy and glory and gladness and fruitfulness. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: The Case of the Buried Treasure
Series: Secrets of the Spirit
Scripture: Matt 13:44
Message No: 6
Catalog No: 457
Date: June 27, 1971

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