

Barratt Ministries Challenge

Issue 70

The Pearl

The Kingdom Series Part 9

by Alex Robertson

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man, seeking goodly pearls: who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had, and bought it” (Matthew 13:45,46).

In our studies of the kingdom parables in Matthew chapter 13, we have seen Satan’s plan to corrupt and compromise the pure gospel of the kingdom which Jesus preached. In the last issue of Challenge we saw the beginning of God’s plan, which is to do the opposite – to purify and separate his people. He does this in 3 ways: firstly through redemption, secondly through suffering, and finally through judgement. The parable of the treasure hidden in the field spoke of Christ paying the price to buy the whole world so that he may obtain out of it a treasure – “a holy nation, a peculiar people” (1 Peter 2:9). Redemption, and our realization of what redemption means, that “you are not your own, for you are bought with a price” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20), is the beginning of God’s plan to separate and “purify unto himself a peculiar people” (Titus 2:14).

The parable of the pearl is similar to the parable of the treasure. In each case, a man sells all he has to buy something precious. We saw in the parable of the treasure that the man is not representative of us, but of Jesus. Jesus is the one who “sold all he had”, his glory with his Father, to become man and to die to redeem us. In the parable of the pearl, it is therefore likely that the merchant also signifies Jesus, in which case the pearl signifies what Jesus wants to buy, and for which he is willing to give all he has.

Pearls in the Bible

Pearls are rarely mentioned in the bible. Apart from Jesus’ instruction to not “cast your pearls before swine” and Paul’s admonition to women not to adorn themselves “with brodered hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array”, the only mention of the word in the New Testament is in Revelation; once to describe the attire of the harlot, Babylon, and once in the description of the gates of New Jerusalem. New Jerusalem is the bride of the Lamb, and the harlot Babylon is the counterfeit of that bride. This gives us a clue as to the significance of the pearl. Jesus is seeking a bride. In eternity, his satisfaction and joy will be his bride. Just as Adam only found fulfilment when Eve was created out of his side, so Christ can only be fulfilled by becoming one with his bride, who is “bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh”. Christ is indeed a man seeking a pearl of great price. There is a hymn that says “I’ve found the pearl of greatest price”, meaning “I’ve found Jesus”, but that puts the wrong interpretation on the parable, and it tells an untruth, because in fact it is Jesus who has found us, not us who find him. The shepherd finds the sheep; the sheep are too stupid to find the shepherd.

Jesus found the pearl, and the pearl is his bride. For that bride, he gave himself, all that he had. Paul draws the parallel between the love of a husband for his wife with the love of Christ for the church. “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish” (Ephesians 5:25-27). A pearl is very beautiful, not ostentatious like gold or sparkling diamonds, but subtle and delicate. This is the beauty of the bride described in Ephesians. “Without spot” means beautiful, flawless; “without wrinkle” means young and fresh, with the pure skin and features of youth. How does the church attain this beauty of the bride? Is it all the work of Christ, or do we have a part to play?

The formation of the pearl

We can gain an answer from seeing the way in which a pearl is formed. An oyster is a soft-bodied mollusc, and its tightly-shut shell protects it from harm. Occasionally, however, a grain of sand or grit will get inside the shell. Then the soft flesh of the oyster is irritated by the sharpness of the grit, and to ease its suffering, the oyster secretes a substance which forms a smooth coating around the grit, covering the sharp edges. This is the pearl. The bigger the piece of grit, the bigger the pearl. The greater the suffering, the more beautiful the pearl. The delicate beauty of the pearl only comes into being through suffering.

Throughout the history of the church there has been suffering. Jesus announced that we are blessed if we are persecuted for his name. He made it quite plain that “in this world you shall have tribulation” (John 16:33). Paul agreed: “all who live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution” (2 Timothy 3:12), and spoke of “the fellowship of [Christ’s] sufferings” (Philippians 3:10). The reality of suffering and even the call to suffer is found right through the New Testament. Peter says, “Forasmuch then as Christ hath suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves likewise with the same mind” (1 Peter 4:1). But more than this, suffering for Christ is a condition for entering the kingdom. “If we suffer, we shall also reign with him”, said Paul (2 Timothy 2:12), and he exhorted the disciples in Antioch that “we must through much tribulation enter the kingdom” (Acts 14:22) – suggesting that there is no other way to enter it. In Romans he says that we are “heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ, if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together” (Romans 8:17). The message is very clear: a place at the marriage supper of the Lamb in the kingdom is only gained through suffering. The bride only becomes the bride through the process of suffering.

Right up to the present day, persecution and suffering continues in the church. From China to Mexico, from Pakistan to Cambodia, Christians are harassed, imprisoned, tortured, killed for their faith. Every 3 minutes a Christian somewhere in the world dies for their faith. In the time it takes you to read this article, another number will have been added to the list of martyrs. And the suffering will not stop – indeed it will increase worldwide as the day of antichrist draws near, and will only cease when Christ returns for his pure, holy bride.

Persecution is God's plan

Lest we should attribute all this suffering to Satan's attacks, let us remember that we are looking at a parable about God's plan to purify his people, not Satan's plan to destroy God's people! We have seen Satan's work in the previous parables. His preferred method of attack is not persecution, it is subtle corruption and compromise from within. That 'sweet poison' is far more effective.

Persecution may look like the devil's work, but it is actually God's work. God may be using Satan to do it, but the results do not please Satan at all. Persecution always makes the church grow, purifies the church from mixture and compromise, and produces the beauty of holiness in those who suffer.

The furnace of affliction tempers the saints and produces a quality in them like no other. The astonishing thing is that Christians come out of inhuman privations, hardships, abuse and physical and mental suffering not bitter, not hard, but filled with love, joy, peace and grace. There is a delicate, precious beauty that shines from such saints, the true "fragrance of Christ".

The Danger Of Babylon

But where does that leave us in the prosperous, comfortable West? Without a doubt, it leaves us more in danger of corruption and compromise. Babylon, the indulgent, comfortable harlot, is the counterfeit of the bride, "decked with gold and precious stones and pearls" (Revelation 17:4), and Babylon is prevalent in the "free" West. Both the bride and the harlot have pearls, but there is a vast difference between the two. The bride, New Jerusalem, is made of gold, precious stones and pearl; they are part of her very nature; but the harlot merely wears them as ornaments. Some Christians in the West wear a cross but they certainly do not live the cross. They wear the emblem of suffering, and they may talk all the right talk, but they "walk as enemies of the cross of Christ" (Philippians 3:18). Like Babylon, they "live luxuriously and glorify themselves" (Revelation 18:7). It's so easy for us in the West to be caught up in luxurious living and self-glorification. But it's a mockery and a travesty of the gospel.

However, times are changing, and persecution may not be far away for us. Besides, there are many forms of suffering besides the open attack of persecution. We may not be thrown into prison or tortured, but of one thing there is no doubt: whoever and wherever we are, if we fully obey the call of Christ, it will at times cost us dearly and be a cause of much pain and suffering. Denying self and dying to self will always be painful. Trials, whatever their nature, throw us onto God and put us in a place of great helplessness and great need. But as a result, something deep is forged in the soul. We may not understand it at the time. We may only feel the pain. But the pearl is being formed within us, and the suffering will purify us and transform us into the holy, spotless bride.

EXPERIENCES FROM LIFE

by Joanna Barratt

Forgiveness: Kingdom Passport

The strongest motivation for forgiveness is always our own experience of having been forgiven, and our awareness of how badly we need forgiveness for the wrongs we have done others. It is impossible to become a 'pearl' unless somewhere along the line we exercise forgiveness. The things that irritate us (the grain of sand in the oyster) will never go away by themselves, they are there to stay. However they can be cushioned by our change of attitude so that they no longer cause irritation - or in most cases anger, bitterness and hatred.

Forgiveness goes beyond human fairness, it is pardoning those things that can't readily be pardoned at all. It is more than excusing. When we excuse someone, we brush their mistake aside and do not punish them for it. When we forgive, we not only pardon a failing or a deliberate act of evil, but we also embrace the person responsible and seek to rehabilitate and restore them. Our forgiveness may not always be accepted, yet once we have reached out our hand, we cleanse ourselves of resentment. We may remain deeply wounded, but we will not use our hurt to inflict further pain on others.

When we revisit a negative memory in the sense of reliving another person's wrongs to us, it becomes a grudge. It doesn't matter if the cause of the grudge is real or imagined: the effect is the same. Once there, it will slowly eat away at us until it spills out and corrodes everything around us.

The Curse of Bitterness

We all know bitter people. They have an amazing memory for the tiniest detail, and they wallow in self-pity and resentment. They catalogue every offence against them and are always ready to show others how much they have been hurt. On the outside they may appear to be calm and composed, but inside they are bursting with pent-up hatred.

These people defend their indignation constantly. They feel that they have been hurt too deeply and too often, and that somehow this exempts them from the need to forgive. But it is just these people who need to forgive most of all. Their hearts are sometimes so full of rancour that they no longer have the capacity to love.

Bitterness is more than just a negative outlook on life. It is destructive, and also self-destructive. Wilfully holding grudges against another person has a disastrous effect. It opens the door to evil and leaves us vulnerable to thoughts of spite, hatred and even murder. It destroys our souls, and it can destroy our bodies as well. We know that stress can cause an ulcer or a migraine, but we often fail to see the relationship between bitterness and insomnia, for example. Medical researchers have even shown a connection between unresolved anger and heart attacks; it seems that people who bottle up their resentment are far more susceptible than those who are able to defuse it by venting their emotions.

Even if we recognise the need to forgive, we are sometimes tempted to claim that we cannot. It is simply too hard, too difficult; something for saints, maybe, but not the rest of us. We think that we have been hurt one time too many, that our side of the story has been misrepresented, or that we have not been understood.

Chris's Story

The following is the true story of Chris Carrier who forgave a man most of us would wish dead. As a 10 year old in Miami, he was abducted and assaulted by a former employee of his father's and left to die in the Florida Everglades. He writes:

"Friday, December 20th, 1974, was no ordinary day. It was the last day of school before the Christmas holidays, and we got out early. I stepped off the bus at 1.15 p.m. and began to walk home. An older-looking man who happened to be walking towards me on the sidewalk appeared to recognise me. Just 2 houses away from home, he introduced himself as a friend of my father. He told me he was hosting a party for my father and asked if I would help him with some decorations. I agreed and walked back up the street with him to the local youth centre where he had parked his motor home. Once inside the vehicle, I put down my things and made myself comfortable.

The Miami I knew quickly disappeared as he drove north. In an area removed from suburban traffic, he stopped on the side of the road. He claimed that he had missed a turn. He handed me a map, instructing me to look for a certain number, and went into the back of the motor home "to get something".

As I studied the map and waited. I felt a quick sting in the shoulder, and then another. I turned around to see him standing behind me with an ice pick in his hand. Then he pulled me out of my seat and onto the floor. Kneeling over me, he stabbed me in the chest several times. I pleaded with him to stop and promised that if he would let me go, I wouldn't say anything.

I was immeasurably relieved when he stood up. He told me that he was going to drop me off somewhere, after which he would call my father and let him know where I was. He allowed me to sit in the back of the motor home as he drove. Yet I was painfully aware that this situation was beyond my control. When I asked him why he was doing this to me, he said that my father had "cost him a great deal of money".

After driving for another hour or so, he turned onto a dusty side road. He told me this was where my father would pick me up. We walked out together into the bushes and I sat down where he told me I should sit. The last thing I remembered was him walking away."

6 Days later Chris was found by a local deer hunter. His head was bloody and his eyes were black. He had been shot through the head. Miraculously, there was no brain damage, but he didn't remember being shot. In the months that followed, he struggled daily with the insecurity of knowing that his abductor was still at large. He also had to come to terms with the physical limitations caused by his wounds: he was now blind in one eye and could not take part in contact sports. As any teenager would, he worried about his appearance.

A life-changing phone call

Chris resented public mention of his survival, and remembers wondering how this “miracle” could have left him so miserable. Amazingly, at the age of 13 he underwent a change. He began to see his nightmare differently. He realised his injuries could have been much worse - in fact, he could have died. He also recognised that he could not stay angry forever. He decided to turn his back on animosity, revenge, and self-pity forever. Then, September '96, Chris received a phone call that changed his life once again. A detective from the Coral Gables police department called to notify him that a man - David McAllister - had confessed to being his abductor. David had worked as a physical aide for an elderly uncle in Chris's family. He had been fired on account of his drinking problems. Chris visited David the following day.

When Chris visited him he felt an overwhelming compassion for the man. David was no longer an intimidating abductor, but a frail 77 yr. old weighing around 60 lbs. Blinded by Glaucoma, his body ruined by alcoholism and smoking, with no family or friends, he was a man facing death with only regrets to keep him company. The friend accompanying Chris wisely asked David a few simple questions that led to him admitting the abduction, and asked, “Did you ever wish you could tell that young boy you were sorry for what you did?” David answered emphatically, “I wish I could.” Chris introduced himself, David clasped his hand and cried that he was sorry. In return, Chris offered him forgiveness and friendship.

Chris says it wasn't hard to forgive, even though the media didn't understand and would rather focus on the drama of the abduction and torture. But Chris said there was a very pragmatic reason for forgiving. If we choose revenge, our lives will be consumed by anger. When vengeance is served, it leaves one empty. Anger is a hard urge to satisfy and can become habitual. But forgiveness allows us to move on. We don't only draw strength to forgive from a personal search for peace, but also from our faith in God. Chris's trial had produced a pearl to bless the heart of Christ.