

# Meeting With Christ

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Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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## THE PARABLE OF THE HIDDEN TREASURE (2)

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### Matthew 13:44

We mentioned in our last lesson that the parable of the lost treasure can be interpreted in two different ways. The first interpretation understands the treasure to represent Jesus and the believer as the man who sold everything to get it. This is the view we explained the last time.

Today we will defend the other interpretation which takes the view that Jesus is the buyer of the field. The treasure represents potential believers who are in the world. In this case, Jesus is the one who pays the price in order to save the life of man.

Let's begin by reading this parable once again.

*Matthew 13:44. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.*

### Hidden in a field

When we take the view that Jesus is the treasure (which is the first interpretation), several problems arise. First of all, it makes this parable simply a repetition of the following one. The parable of the lost treasure and the parable of the pearl of great price would teach more or less the same thing. Whether Jesus taught them in sequence or whether Matthew placed them together is unknown. The fact is that they occur only in Matthew and that they are found one after the other. Why would Jesus want to repeat Himself? That in itself is not a fatal objection, we concede. But if you know Jesus, you know that every word that He pronounces is important and that He rarely repeats the same teaching. It would be somewhat awkward to have two consecutive parables saying the same thing. So there is reason to believe that Jesus, in giving both parables, was not merely repeating Himself.

The second objection is this. In Matthew 13:38, only a few verses before, we read that the field is the world. So Jesus is the treasure. Somebody hid that treasure. That somebody must be God. And where does God hide Jesus? In the world. This idea of hiding salvation is hard to justify. Jesus is our Savior. He is our salvation. God does not hide Jesus in the world. He does not hide His kingdom in the world.

The last time, we saw that Paul says in 2Corinthians 4:3-4 that 'if our gospel is hidden, it is not because God hid it. It is hidden from those who perish because the god of this world blinded their eyes.' You see Paul's point? 'Our gospel is not hidden. If there is anything hidden about it, it is the god of this world who hides it from you. Don't attribute to God what Satan does. If there is something

concealed about the kingdom of God, it is not because God concealed it. It is because Satan concealed the kingdom from your eyes so that you cannot see the light of the gospel of Christ.’

Jesus came into the world to be the light of the world (John 8:12). He came to reveal God’s light, not to conceal it. He says in Matthew 5:15, ‘No one lights a lamp to put it under a bushel. I did not light a lamp to hide it but to reveal that light, to give light to the people who are in the house.’ Such is the nature of Jesus’ ministry.

### **Re-hiding the treasure**

Then we have another problem. We read that the man, after discovering the treasure, hides it again. He covers it up. Now exegetically, it is very hard to make sense of this action. I find Jesus and then I hide Him from other people? What does it mean that having found the treasure, I conceal it again? When did we do that in our walk with the Lord? We have a hard time thinking about what that corresponds to.

Most commentators do not deal with this issue. And when they do, they argue that there is no need to press that question since it is not the point of the parable. It seems idle, they think, to seek any special meaning in the re-hiding or even in the field. Well, this is an argument that is not really an argument. You can always say that when you want to drop out an element in a parable that does not fit well a particular interpretation. Because the story line requires the man to bury his treasure again in order for his plan to succeed, some say that we don’t have to derive any allegorical meaning from that action. Well, why not? True, this matter of re-hiding is necessary for the story to make sense, but that doesn’t automatically rule out the possibility that it may contain a meaning. And remember, the shorter a parable is, the higher is the likelihood that each action or each element has a symbolic meaning.

If you take that Jesus is the treasure, then the parable becomes something like this. Jesus is the treasure that you discover accidentally in the field. The field has already been defined a few verses earlier, in Jesus’ explanation of the parable of the tares, as being the world (Matthew 13:38). So having discovered Jesus by chance, you conceal Him back into the world. And then, you go away and sell all that you have to do what? To buy the field, the world. You can see that this way of interpreting the parable becomes extremely difficult to follow.

### **The value of the lost**

Now having explained the problems, let us consider the parable the other way around. Let us suppose that Jesus is not the treasure. Instead, we are that treasure in the field. Man is the treasure.

Some of us may not be accustomed to think of people as treasures. We were brought up as Christians on the doctrine of original sin. Man is sick, corrupt and sinful. What value can there be in a man who is totally depraved, who has inherited original sin and who is sick beyond remedy? We may have come to the conclusion that unless God put some value into sinful man, man has no value. And therefore we believe that a sinner has no value until he is saved. But that is not the case.

In the OT, God says, *He who touches you touches the apple of His (My) eye* (Zechariah 2:8). That’s how much Israel meant to God. Remember that this was said when the nation was completely disobedient. But in spite of their wrong attitude, the people of Israel were still precious to God. Then in Hosea, the Lord speaks of this rebellious nation as His wife whom He has loved and will continue to love. ‘I will do everything I can to redeem Israel from her sins.’

Jesus regarded the lost person in the same way. If we can see people with Jesus’ eyes, we will go out to them in love with Jesus’ love. How does He see the sinner? Look at His parables in Luke 15.

The first parable is the parable of the lost sheep. The second parable is the parable of the lost coin. And the third one is the parable of the lost son. The lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son, they all symbolize the lost person. And in each story, we are told that the lost people are all extremely valuable to God.

### **Matthew's parable of the lost treasure**

Now think for a moment about the parable of the lost coin. There you see that Luke has individualized that parable, that is to say, he applied the matter of sinfulness to the individual. Each sinner individually is one lost silver coin. Now, if you take a lot of lost coins and you put them together, what do you get? You will have in your hands a treasure, a lost treasure.

Now we begin to get the point of the parable in Matthew. What is the hidden treasure? It is a lost treasure. We saw that the treasure is found by somebody else because the person who originally owned it was killed, or deported, or died of sickness, or simply could not find it anymore. He lost it and somebody else found it. In other words, this parable in Matthew is really the parable of the lost treasure. We can say that it is Matthew's counterpart to Luke's parable of the lost coin.

This parable is indeed a wonderful picture that reveals God's heart to a lost mankind. Remember this. Human beings are precious to God. They are a treasure, even though they are lost. You and I were part of that lost treasure. And Jesus came into the world precisely to find us, a treasure lost and buried in the world. Notice that the word 'buried' is naturally connected with the idea of death in the Bible. Indeed, that's what we were. We were lost in the sense of being dead in trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1).

### **Searching for the lost**

But although we are lost, God looks for us and He aims to find us. 'The kingdom of heaven is like a hidden treasure which a man found.' This word 'find' is very meaningful. In Ezekiel 34, God speaks again and again that He seeks His lost sheep. He will look for them until He finds them. He says in v. 16, 'I will seek the sheep that I lost.' Then in v. 22, He says, *I will **save** my flock, they shall no longer be a prey...* To seek is to save. The purpose of the seeking is to save. In the NT, this is well illustrated by the parable of the lost sheep. The shepherd keeps looking for the missing sheep until he finds it.

In every age, in every generation, God seeks people. He looks for men who will be willing to serve Him, to function as light in the world in order to bring others to salvation. There is a passage in the OT that expresses beautifully God's heart in this respect. *So I **sought** for a man among them who would make a wall, and stand in the gap before Me on behalf of the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found no one* (Ezekiel 22:30). God was looking for somebody who would come to the rescue of Israel, who would proclaim the truth to the nation and lead people into confession. But in that generation, He could find no one. In Samuel 13:14, we read about someone God was able to find. And that person was David. The prophet Samuel said, *The Lord has **sought** for Himself a man after His own heart.*

Can He find such a person today? In John 4:23, the Lord Jesus says that those who truly worship Him are those who worship Him with the heart, in spirit and in truth. In the next sentence, Jesus says, *For the Father is **seeking** such to worship Him.* The Father seeks those who will worship Him in this way. God is looking for people who are willing to turn away from their sins, to be cleansed by the blood of Christ and to be made pure. And when He finds such people, indeed He finds a treasure.

And that is why Jesus says that for one sinner who repents, all the angels in heaven rejoice (Luke 15:10). What is the point of rejoicing? Man, in spite of his sins, has great value to God. Each sinner is so precious to God that when one turns back to Him, all the angels of heaven rejoice. And when many repent, it is like having a treasure.

## **Hiding from God's face**

Now notice the word 'hidden', a treasure hidden in a field, hidden in the world. We find that the word 'hide' or 'hidden' is often used in the Bible in connection with sin, or with a consequence of sin in some way. It starts right at the beginning of the Scriptures when Adam sinned. What did he do? Adam hid himself from God (Genesis 3:10). In Amos 9:3, God said to Israel, 'Though you hide yourself from Me, My judgment will catch up with you.' No sinner can escape the judgment of God. Here the warning is addressed to the sinful people of Israel. God declares Himself as an enemy to them and says that He will destroy them.

But when we stop hiding from God, then salvation comes. When we draw near to Him, we find that He draws near to us. Take for example Psalm 32:5. *I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord," and You forgave the iniquity of my sin.* In truly repentant spirit, unlike Adam who hid himself, the psalmist here confessed his transgressions and was forgiven. When we stop hiding and we confess our sins, God will forgive us. When this treasure is found by God and comes out of its hiding place, then God's salvation comes to us. So you see that this hiddenness has to do with our sinfulness.

## **Hidden in God**

What about the part of the story in which the man, having found the treasure, hides that treasure again? It is important to deal with that question. We saw earlier that when we apply it to the Lord Jesus, it is hard to make sense of it. Will it make more sense if we say that God, after finding us, hides us again in the field? Yes, there is a rich meaning that comes out of this interpretation.

Why do you think that the treasure was hidden in the first place? To keep it safe, of course. To protect it so that it will not be taken by somebody else. And now, this second concealing after it is found is also for the same purpose – to keep it safe. This applies also to the people that God has found.

Look at it in the sense that the Lord Jesus hides what is His. He protects His people from the judgment of God, from the wrath against sin. Take Luke 13:34 for example. *O Jerusalem ... how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings but you were not willing!* Why does a hen gather its chicks for? To hide them, to hide them from the hawk or the eagle that is seeking to devour them. In this case, the offer of protection was rejected. When we are saved, Jesus hides us in the world in Himself to protect us from the judgment. Remember that we are still in the world. 'I am going to leave you behind in the world,' the Lord Jesus said to His disciples. 'You will have tribulation. But in Me, you will have peace (John 16:33).' We are concealed in the world in Christ, protected in a certain sense.

So we find that He conceals us for our protection from evil men. This is beautifully demonstrated in John 18:8. When people came to arrest Jesus, He gave Himself up but He sheltered His disciples. He hid them. He said, *If you seek Me, let these go their way.* 'You take Me and you let them go.' That is exactly like this hen which hid its chicks under its wings. 'You take Me. Don't take my chicks.'

Here is another verse that tells us that Jesus protects us from the assaults of wicked men and evil spirits. Colossians 3:3: *For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God.* Our life is hidden in Christ with God. The language used in this sentence reminds us of the parable of the hidden

treasure. The idea is that something precious – a treasure – is hidden or concealed in a place of security. We are in the safe keeping of our Redeemer. But although our life is hidden in Christ, it is still a life lived out on earth. We still have to face tribulations. So we are both in the world and in Christ.

In the OT, we find the same thing, that God hides His people in His presence. We read in Psalm 31:20, *You shall hide them in the secret place of Your presence from the plots of man.* In fact, in Psalm 83.3, the people of God are referred to as the ‘hidden ones.’ *They have taken crafty counsel against thy people, and consulted against thy hidden ones* (KJV). In other Bibles, it is translated as the ‘protected ones’ (RSV), or the ‘treasured ones’ (NAS). So the elect of God are hidden by the Lord as His peculiar treasure (Exodus 19:5), hidden under the shadow of his wings, under His special protection.

## **We were bought**

Then notice the word ‘go’, to go away. In Greek, this is the same word that Jesus used about Himself when He talked about leaving and going away from this world, from the field. In John 13:33, He said to His disciples, *Little children, I am with you a little while longer. You shall seek Me; and as I said to the Jews, I now say to you also, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.'* ‘I have to go away. You cannot follow Me. You have to stay in the world. I will return to My Father.’

This going away means of course that He was going to die. Through His death, He goes to the Father. And what does He do when He goes away? He goes away to buy the field. The same Greek word is used in 1Corinthians 6:20 and 7:23 where it says, ‘You are not your own. You were bought with a price.’ That is exactly what the parable is saying. Jesus bought us. He redeemed us to Himself.

The apostle Peter makes the same point in 2Peter 2:1. *But there were also false prophets among the people ... who will be denying the Lord who bought them...* Notice. These false Christians were also bought by the Lord. But they denied Him who bought them. You see, Jesus did not die only for the Christians. He died for the sins of the whole world. He bought the whole field. This is even more clearly stated in 1John 2:2. *And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.* In other words, the treasure in the field, all the lost sinners in the world are His by right. He bought them all.

But before He could buy the field, He had to sell all that He had. He laid down His life to redeem the world to Himself. This word ‘sell’ means that He gave up everything for us. And that is exactly what the apostle Paul says in 2Corinthians 8:9, *that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich.* The Lord Jesus was rich and for our sake, He became poor. No wonder, He sold everything He had! Through this poverty, He redeemed us. And He died for us when we were still sinners, when we were still His enemies. This is the whole gospel summed up in a nutshell.

So Jesus sold everything to buy us. ‘You were bought with a price,’ He said. ‘You don’t belong to yourself anymore.’ And because He bought us, we now become His, His treasure. Little wonder that the Bible speaks of the people of God as God’s special possession. For example, we read in Exodus 19:5, *Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people...* Peter says the same thing in the NT. *But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people...* (1Peter 2:9). We are His special possession, precious to Him.

## Some objections

The parable of the hidden treasure refers to Jesus sacrificing everything to save us. Any problem that you can think of with this interpretation will arise just as much in connection with the three parables in Luke 15. Any objection to the exposition of the hidden treasure as the church will relate equally to the exposition of the three parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son.

For example, we can bring the objection that there is no active seeking on the part of the man. It just says that he found the treasure. Didn't we mention that God seeks people to be a light in this world? So where is the seeking? Well, we find the same situation with the parables in Luke 15. In the parable of the lost son, the father is not said to be seeking the son at all. He stays at home. It is the son who returns to the father and repents. Actually this objection applies less to the parable of the hidden treasure than to the parable of the son because in the parable of the hidden treasure, we are only assuming that he was not looking for the treasure. In the parable of the lost son, it is clear from the story that the father is not out there looking for his son.

You see, each parable is designed to emphasize certain points. The parables do not cover every aspect of the gospel. The parable of the lost son does not emphasize God's searching for the lost because the emphasis is on something else. What is emphasized is the necessity of repentance on the part of the sinner in order to be found by God. The parable of the hidden treasure has a different emphasis, namely that the finding of the treasure is very costly to God.

Here is another objection. Jesus cannot be looking for a hidden treasure because it would imply that He does not know where the treasure is. Again, this objection would apply to Luke 15. We could say that if Jesus is the shepherd looking for the lost sheep, then it implies that He does not know where the lost sheep is, otherwise the lost sheep would not be lost. If we think like that, we are missing the point of the parable again. Because the stress is not on the seeking of the hidden treasure. The stress is on the finding of the treasure. The notion that the treasure is hidden or lost indicates that God is seeking a response from us. It is not that He doesn't know where we are.

As a result of all this discussion, it is our conviction that the parable of the hidden treasure is a teaching on the redemption of man. It refers to the saving work of Christ, who sacrificed everything in order to save the lost.