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Golden Candlestick

NEHEMIAH

**THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD
IN RELATION TO
THE HOUSE OF GOD**

THE PEARL OF GREAT PRICE

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Volume 173

NEHEMIAH

The book of Nehemiah has a real message for God's church today. There is far too much in it for even a reminder in one message. But there is perhaps a thing or two that the Lord would have us consider, not turning you to any particular part of it. You can take it from the first words: "... the history" (the margin says) — "the history of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah".

The very presence of that name at the head of this book is significant and impressive, because it was not there at the beginning; there was no book called the Book of Nehemiah in the Old Testament. This book was united with Ezra in the Hebrew Bible until a very much later time and they were known as the First and Second Books of Ezra. But there came a time when they were separated into two books in this way, and given the names of the two men mostly in view in their sections: Ezra and Nehemiah. The point I want you to notice is that there was something of the sovereignty of God about giving this man's name to this part of history, and what it contains.

There are a lot of names in this book. Probably if you do read through the whole book, there is one chapter that you will not read — that is, chapter 10. It is just a book full of names, and a lot of peculiar names at that; you just skip that when we read through. I think we make a mistake if we do that, for this reason, that neither Nehemiah nor any of those people whose names are mentioned — and there are a fairly large company — would ever have come to be known; would ever have come to have a place in the Bible, as Bible names, but for their relationship to the purpose of God in their time. That is impressive and very significant. We should probably never have known that there was such a man as Nehemiah, and we certainly should not have had any of those other names which are on record in Holy Scripture, and we could say in heaven, but for their relationship to the purpose of God in the time in which they lived.

Nehemiah was not a king; he was not a priest, and he was not a prophet. Who was he? Well, all we know is that he was 'the son of Hacaliah'. Search that out; try and make something of that; find out something about that if you like. We know that he was a cup-bearer in the palace of Artaxerxes;

that was an important position of honour. He was evidently a man of some character and distinction; the book makes all that perfectly clear. But as to any of the great official capacities, such as kings, priests, and prophets, he was none of these. We could say he was just a *man*. And who were all these people? Well, the Lord only knows. We have got a lot of names but the Lord did not take into account who they were in themselves — that was not the point. But here they are; they are a part of this very vital history in Israel, and indeed it is a movement of God that is being recorded here. A tremendous amount behind it that is just the Lord. They came to be known and put into the Bible, this immortal book, for one reason only: not what they were in themselves, but because of their relationship to what was God's specific purpose in the time in which they lived.

There was a divine sovereignty behind that. Divine sovereignty just means that it must be God. It is not divine sovereignty if it is man's importance, and man's ability, man's qualifications, and you can put it down to anything in man, and you can say: Well, he (or she) being such a person, having such abilities and qualifications, position, influences and resources, well, what would you expect but that such an one should do something outstanding? It is not like that. Divine sovereignty just means that if anything is done, it is God, and God alone. Where people are chosen to do it, they are chosen of God for no other reason than that He chooses them — He chooses to choose them — it is God. But there is another side that is very clear in this book, that while undoubtedly divine sovereignty was at work behind both Nehemiah and the people with him, there was the other side. It was not of ability, for the story shows how imperfect these people were; how easy it was even for them to lose heart, and give up, and delay, and so on. Nevertheless, it is perfectly clear that both Nehemiah and the people had a heart committal to that which God desired in their time. We know that to be true of Nehemiah. The enemies were wrath that there was a man who had come to seek the good of the people, and all that we know about him, especially in the early part of the book, shows how this man's heart was bound up with this situation and with God's honour and glory in it. Something that really was a burden, a distress, a concern, of Nehemiah's. And it comes out with the people too, in a very real way; the people had a mind to work; they had a very real heart concern for what God particularly wanted in the time in which they lived. Those two sides always go together: that is, God's sovereignty working and choosing, and man's response to God's need. Now the point is this, when you put those two things together — and you cannot have the one without the other — God

gives a significance to life and to the lives which they would never have but for a discovery that God desires such-and-such a thing in our day. And for us there is nothing else in life but that God should find His satisfaction in that.

You may put yourselves among these many people in chapter 10; not more than names really here, a whole crowd of perhaps ordinary people. At any rate they would never have been mentioned or had any place but for this particular purpose of God in their lives. You may put yourself in such a category — I think we are all there — and naturally we may count for little or nothing; we may never come to anything at all. The majority of us would not be anything, of any or little account in life so far as our lives here are concerned. We would spend our life, do our work, perhaps do a lot of good things, pass on, and that is the end of the story. It is bound to be like that unless there is a linking in by divine sovereignty on the one side, and by our response and committal on the other to the thing that God has in view in our day. Let there be no mistaking it, God has a purpose in our day; God is committed to a thing very near to His heart in our time. And our value, our place in divine records, our name, history and significance is going to be entirely governed by this: how far we served *the* purpose of God, and were governed by it in our day and in our generation. To be so linked in with the Lord is to give to people and to life a significance beyond anything that would obtain at best otherwise.

Now, you see, this is the situation here. God willed that this work should be done. God willed that what these people came to do should be done in their time. There is no doubt about it, that was God's purpose in their time. And that purpose of God in their time did these three things.

First of all, *it brought God into evidence*. This is a book with God in evidence, there is no doubt about that. These two books combined into one, Ezra and Nehemiah, are a record of God coming in in evidence. We call it divine sovereignty. Go away there into the captivity, and see the movement of divine sovereignty to have this. See the people coming back under the hand of God, and see God here with them in this work. It is not all easy, it is true, but the verdict is: So the work was finished ... so the wall was built. And what a testimony! When you think of all that they met, all that with which they had to contend, all the opposition, all the difficulties, all the discouragements in their own hearts, and all the complications of the situation outside, and the enemies from every direction.

But the end is that the wall was built; the work was finished. That is a testimony to God. It is going to be like that. In the much larger purpose of God, we may feel at times that the whole thing is impossible; too much. We find the discouragement in our own hearts; we find opposition on the outside; we find all the complications associated with this purpose of God, but it is going to be finished. In the end, the verdict is going to be the same: ‘So the work was finished; so the wall was built.’ It was a completed thing. God never undertakes something that He cannot see through. It will be like that. But, it is the purpose that brings God into evidence; not just ourselves, our significance; it is the purpose with which we are bound up.

The second thing is: *it is the purpose that brought both Nehemiah and these people into view at all*. As I say, they would never have been heard of, never have been known, their names would never have been in the Bible, and never would they have had a place in sacred history but for the purpose of God. You see what that means. It is the purpose of God that will bring any of us into the place of eternal accountability or accountableness. It will be the purpose of God that will bring immortality into our history. And if we are ever known, or heard of, it will be for the reason that God took account of hearts and lives who had what was nearest to His heart on their hearts as their chief concern.

But there was this third aspect of the story: *it was this purpose that enraged the enemy*. It was the purpose of God which brought all these enemies into being or brought them out into their antagonism. The opposition was many-sided, varied, but very persistent. Why? Well really, Nehemiah, in himself, was not very much to be taken account of. And these people? Well, who were they? There was a time when they tried the line of discounting, scorn and ridicule, for the people and for the work: “What do these feeble, these *feeble* Jews?” Well, it is quite true. All right, you are quite right about that. And even their wall: “If a fox go up against it, it will tumble down.” Well, it may be poor work from this world’s standpoint — nothing very massive, not very wonderful although they are doing their best. Yes, there is nothing on that side to enrage these enemies. It is simply the purpose of God that drew it all out. A lot of opposition cannot be explained. There is really no sense in it, no reason for it, from any human standpoint. Who are the people? What are the people? What is the work that they are doing? It does not stand alongside the wonderful things that many are doing, even in the religious world. Look at it: what is it? Look at them: what are they? And yet it seems worth their while to fight in every conceivable way to destroy and to spoil. You cannot explain it on any other ground than that

there is something here that God purposes, and the devil knows that. It is the purpose, not the people, and not the thing, but the *purpose* of God that stirs hell, and brings out the opposition.

Well, I must leave it there. But it would be perhaps leaving you somewhere in the air if I did not remind you that these men and their fellowworkers, Ezra and Nehemiah, were rebuilding Jerusalem. Nehemiah's part was mainly the wall, not altogether by any means, but the wall comes very much into view with him. They were really rebuilding the city. And you know, Satan always sees a fuller significance in things than men do. Again it is impressive that when God took His first steps in this nation of Israel, and failed Abraham, the first of this nation, he forsook an earthly city, and we are told he looked for a Heavenly City. It was a city that was in the vision of Abraham; and all along this City of Jerusalem has had such a large place.

We know quite well that it is no earthly city that is God's object. This is only, after all, symbolic of something more. So, when we reach the end of the Bible, in the very last chapters, we have the City. "He took me up into a great and high mountain, and showed me the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down from God out of Heaven" (Rev. 21:10). We know that is not just a city but that it is a people, the people of God. But the point that I want to make here before I close, is this. When that City or that people, in terms of a city, is seen coming out of Heaven, it is something already complete. The building of that City is not going to begin with the end of time and the beginning of eternity. It is complete at the end of time. It comes in complete at the beginning of eternity: it is complete. When then was it built? It was not built in an hour or in a day! When was it built? It must have taken a long time to build that City, to form that people after that character. It is being done today; it is being done through this message. The City is being built and you are in the building of the City. You are a part of it; but you are being built into it; the character of that City is being built into you: it is going on now! The work will be done when the Heavens open, and the church comes forth as a completed work. It is going on now; we are in this thing that God has foreshadowed in Abraham and in Israel; we are in the spiritual reality of it now. We are called according to this purpose, to be what? To be a people embodying all the essentials and the essence of God's thought concerning a people. That is Jerusalem; the embodiment of God's full thought for a people; that is the purpose. It will stand there at the centre of the universe, God having got that upon which His heart was set, to have Himself expressed in a people.

That is what He is doing now. He is going on. Are we committed to that? Are we with Nehemiah and with this people in heart saying God has set His heart upon having a people, a city, a church which embodies His thoughts and His character? It will be that which will give eternal significance to us, and to our having been here. Again I come back to it — how much is there of the Lord and what the Lord desires — that is the thing which determines our place and our measure in the eternal interests of God. Think about that, and may the Lord show us that this tremendous work of building, is *the* thing to which He has committed Himself. Our New Testament is so unfortunate, is it not, in its translation of that word. Now again and again the original word for building is translated ‘edifying’, which is misleading. We find, “unto edifying”, “unto edification” but the word is ‘unto *building*’. This is the book of *building*. God is at work on building according to Christ. And if our hearts are with Him in that, and we labour with our hearts, as did these people, and are as devoted as this man, Nehemiah, there will be given to our having been here, though very insignificant and unimportant people, a meaning and a value beyond anything that we could be or have otherwise.

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THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD IN RELATION TO THE HOUSE OF GOD

“Thus saith the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to subdue nations before him, and I will loose the loins of kings; to open the doors before him, and the gates shall not be shut; I will go before thee, and make the rugged places plain; I will break in pieces the doors of brass, and cut in sunder the bars of iron and I will give thee the treasures of darkness, and hidden riches of secret places, that thou mayest know that I am the Lord, which call thee by thy name, even the God of Israel” (Isaiah 45:1-3).

“And it shall come to pass, when seventy years are accomplished, that I will punish the king of Babylon, and that nation, saith the Lord, for their iniquity, and the land of the Chaldeans; and I will make it desolate for ever” (Jer. 25:12).

“For thus saith the Lord, After seventy years be accomplished for Babylon, I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place” (Jer. 29:10).

“Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying, Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia ...” (Ezra 1:1-2).

“... in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, understood by the books the number of the years, whereof the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah the prophet, for the accomplishing of the desolations of Jerusalem, even seventy years. And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting and sackcloth and ashes. And I prayed unto the Lord my God, and made confession ...” (Dan. 9:2-4).

These passages of the Word of God, as you realize, compass a history; but a history which declares one great Bible truth, and that is, the truth of the sovereignty of God in relation to His House; the sovereignty of God as related to the House of God.

Now, to stand back from that for a moment; there is no mistaking one feature of history as it is recorded in the Bible. From beginning to end that one feature is the feature of a great conflict. We hardly get into the Bible before we find ourselves in the realm of controversy, dispute, challenge, and conflict. The Lord Himself pronounced that there would be conflict even from this early stage. And right on through almost to the end, that is the characteristic of Bible history. But when we look to see what the occasion of the conflict is, we find two major factors, a primary and a secondary. The primary factor is the Name of the Lord. I do not mean any particular designation of God, but the honor, the supremacy, the uniqueness of the Name of the Lord in this universe. It is primarily over that that all the controversy and all the conflict that is in the Bible rages: for its dethroning and dishonoring on the one side; for its maintenance, upholding, purity and glory on the other side. But the secondary factor in the conflict is a vessel or a people for that Name. Immediately God moves to secure for Himself that where He may put His Name — and it is a people; what we may in the larger term call a ‘vessel’. At the same time God moves in relation to a vessel for His Name, you find you are in the atmosphere again of conflict, challenge, disputing; the battle begins.

The Name of the Lord lies behind everything — that is the fundamental fact; but the vessel for the Name lies in the forefront of everything. These two are related. What touches that vessel that is in the forefront affects the Name which is behind. Let us come to the designation of that ‘vessel’, the House of God. The House for His Name. Wherever and whenever we touch the House of God in the Bible, it is not long before everything springs into life. On the one side, we touch something which is vital to God, about which He is greatly concerned, over which He is very jealous. God, the Living God is associated with this; to touch it is to touch the Living God; to meet it is to meet the Living God. In the Bible, the House is always a live issue on the one side; that is, when you touch the House of God, you are not just touching a dead thing, but you are touching something which is alive; it is vital to God. On the other hand, whenever you come into touch with the House of God in the Bible, you come into touch with forces which are inimical, antagonistic to what it represents and means to God; in other words, the House of God is the centre of a whole age-long conflict. I am not

staying to gather up the data in that connection; anyone who knows the Bible knows quite well how true that is. Here is something that has got to be — if possible — countered, overthrown, destroyed and nullified.

But for our purpose just now it is so very important that we recognize how closely related are the sovereignty of God and the House of God. That sovereignty will be on our side if we are on the side (to put it this way) of the House of God; that sovereignty is shown in the Word of God to be against all who, in any way, are against the House of God. Perhaps some of the most terrible words in the New Testament are those used by the apostle Paul to the Corinthians, when he said of them as a *company* (in another connection he spoke of them as individuals, but in this particular passage he spoke of them as a company): “ye are a temple of God”. And then he went on: “If any man destroyeth the temple of God, him shall God destroy” (1 Cor. 3;16,17). God’s jealous sovereignty over His House.

And if it is true that the sovereignty of God is bound up with His House, it is equally true that the House of God is always the object of satanic antagonism to spoil it if possible.

Now, we have to reduce this very large matter to a few quite definite, practical points. Let us say at once, there are no alternatives to the House of God. With God, there are no alternatives to the church. Because of all the controversies, the conflicts, the confusion in relation to the church, many have sought to turn away from that to some alternatives or substitutes. We know of many, who, because of unhappy situations and conditions in Christendom, which centre in this word ‘church’, have turned from all that kind of thing, as they call it, church teaching and church truth, and they have turned to evangelism. They have said, Well, let the church get on with itself; we will give ourselves to the salvation of souls — as an alternative, you see. I am not saying that in all evangelism that is the motive. But it is true that there is something, perhaps, of almost disgust with what we will call ‘churchianity’, sectarianism, and all the quarrels and divisions. The ‘House of God’ has been thrust aside, and ‘we will get on with the business of soul saving’! It has become an alternative. Others have decided that the course is world evangelization — ‘Let us take the Gospel to the nations; leave all this about the church, and get on with the great business of world evangelization.’ Again all world evangelization is not prompted by that thought or feeling but we know that it is there. There are others who have said, Well, let the church get on with itself while we attend to the needs of mankind in this world — the sufferings, the misery and the poverty, and the what-not! And they have committed themselves to what is called ‘the social

gospel' of improving human life for men and women. Now I am not saying, for one moment, that these things are not right; in themselves they are, but if they are an alternative to the church, see what will happen. There may be a vast amount of energy, expenditure and evangelism, but without a permanent abiding result, and with a great margin of disappointment in comparison with what we have in the New Testament. The evangelism of the New Testament was a tremendous thing. How accountable and effective it was! But it was always related to the church. It was church evangelism, not evangelism as something in itself. We read of evangelization of the world in the New Testament. See the Gospel going to the nations in great compass and range, in the brief period of thirty years! "Their word", it says, "went into all the earth", because it was on church ground. Divide between, separate these things, and let there be that which is an alternative for any reason at all, and see what happens. And what a costly thing is world evangelization, in means and people, and what-not, to a result, a fruitfulness, which cannot compare with those first thirty years of the New Testament. And then, remember, the Lord comes back, and sooner or later the whole thing is shaken to find out what is really solid, real and true, and the whole matter of the House of God springs into life again. The very survival depends upon what the House of God represents: that is fellowship, intercession and relatedness.

God always moves — and here I speak with the Bible in mind — in relation to His main object. It may be a long-term thing; it may be true that the mills of God grind very slowly, but it is true that they grind exceedingly small. God never departs from His original and primary premise, and that is a House for His Name. Now, you see in these Scriptures that we have read how true that is. We have read the words of Isaiah, chapter 45: "Thus saith the Lord to Cyrus ...", and then gathered around that these other words, and come back at last to Ezra and to Daniel. Do you know that Isaiah uttered those words of prophecy about Cyrus nearly two hundred years before Cyrus made that decree, or came on the scene at all! Nearly two hundred years elapsed between Isaiah's saying, "Thus saith the Lord to Cyrus ..."; Cyrus was an unknown person when Isaiah uttered those words. All through that time you have got the completion of the ministry of Isaiah, the rest of his life overlapping into Jeremiah, and you have all the life and work of Jeremiah. Then you have got to add in the seventy years of captivity, as in fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecies — all those years, but at last God moves sovereignly in relation to His House. Yes, He has waited long, but here it is; it may be a long way ahead; not of His choosing, but by

reason of His people's failure. Nevertheless, so far ahead, God has still got His object, and He is not going to abandon it; He is coming back to it. Let years pass; let there be infinite suffering in the meantime; but at length He is coming back to it; He is going to have it. That is New Testament truth as well as Old Testament truth. All this! It is a remarkable thing, is it not, that the sovereignty of God mentions a man's name before that man was born; the sovereignty of God chooses him as the vessel before anybody knows anything about him; the sovereignty of God details what He will do: "I have girded thee although thou hast not known me", says the Word. What the man will do, and what will happen, long, long years before the man is in view at all. The sovereignty of God moves right ahead over all that intervenes, because that sovereignty is bound up with His House; and He is not going to let that thing go because His Name is inextricably and inseparably bound up with a vessel for the Name; He must have it. But in the meantime there is the suffering of the captivity, the exile.

What was the deepest cause of the suffering and of all the delay? And putting our finger upon this we touch this whole matter at a very vital point. It was the lack of a *heart* relationship with the House for His Name. Oh, the House was there; it was called the 'House of God'. That is, the building was there, and a name was on it, the name of Jehovah. The ritual was carried on every day; the whole framework and formality proceeded; but you know from the prophets that this people's *heart* is "far from Me", saith the Lord; there was not a *heart* relationship with the House. The thing was but an object; something that was kept going; but the people had no correspondence of heart with the jealousy of God; for its purity because of His Name; for its livingness, because He was the Living God. It was so cold, so formal, so hollow, so unreal! The cry of the prophets was always about this *heart* matter. How the Lord tried to bring that home to His people through such men as Hosea and Ezekiel, whom He brought into deep and terrible suffering and sorrow in public, so that everybody could see. This man, this young prophet, whose wife has died; this other young prophet whose wife has been unfaithful, and gone after other lovers; and it is all brought out that everybody could see the tragedy in their lives, and say: Oh, isn't this terrible! If they had any sensibility, any feeling at all, it would touch their hearts; but it didn't! And when they asked what the meaning was, the prophets said, 'This is just but an expression, a representation of you and the Lord — unfaithfulness; loss; and you are not touched!' This prophet, when his wife died, has at once to go out before the people with his face anointed; no sign whatever of mourning, grief or tragedy; and the

people say, 'This is a scandal. Here is a man who lost his wife, and he is showing no sign of sorrow!' And at once the prophet has his message: 'You have lost far more than I have and you do not care!' You see, this is all on this matter of a *heart* relationship with what is of God. While it was like that, they were still keeping up the temple service; outwardly the House was there; but there was no *heart* there. That is what brought all the suffering.

So the Lord had to bring them back to the place where they cried: How can we sing the songs of Zion in a strange land! Ah, the heart is waking up now; longing for what has been lost, which can no longer be had; a sense of the *need* of it, and they cannot get it. A consciousness that it is not just an empty form, or framework, or even teaching; but it is something vital and consequential to their very life, this House of God. That is how it must be. We must have such a relationship to the House of God that it is vital to our existence, essential to our life; and to lose that is to lose what we most need of all things in this life.

But then, in order for it to be like that, something has got to happen somewhere. And that is why I read the words from Daniel. Daniel, there in the midst of it, in Babylon, said, I learned from the books the times spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, seventy years. And I prayed, with fastings, sackcloth and ashes, with supplication. That prayer of Daniel in Babylon is a heart-rending prayer! And do you say that that had nothing to do with the going back of the remnant to rebuild the House? I say it did; I say the man in Babylon who prayed like that was God's pivot of delivery and recovery. And until somewhere, somehow, there is that which will get to God in dire anguish about the situation, in travailing prayer over His House, the thing will go on. He must have that; it has always been God's way. We can go through the Bible and see how true that is, that, even in the great sovereign movements of God, His sovereignty has not been separate from someone who entered into His travail. It is like that. The factor of prevailing prayer must be present in reality.

We must close, but note, when we are in line with God's object and purpose and it has become really a heart matter of suffering to us; and God has a people who are committed to the thing which is so close to His heart, see what wonderful things God does! Look! The facilitation of His House; the means provided. We have got to read Ezra and Jeremiah again. We have got to read how the Lord stirred up the spirit of this pagan king who knew Him not and how by his decree every means was provided.

God is sovereign over all resources, over all means, and they are supplied. Get into line with the thing that is nearest to His heart and you get into line

with the operation of that sovereignty. It is on the one side, to provide, to meet all demand; on the other side, to meet the enemy. But it is not for me to close there without saying that even when the remnant got back and started on the building of the House, there were still enemies, and there always will be. Those Samaritans gave that remnant a terrible time, even to the point of suspending operations for some years. It was the people's fault. But there are always enemies about where the House of God is in view, make no mistake about it.

Now we must finish on the note where we began: the sovereignty of God is related to that thing.

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THE PEARL OF GREAT PRICE

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

Without any time taken to establish what I feel is an accepted fact, we assume that this “pearl of great price” is the church; that the merchantman “seeking goodly pearls” is Christ; and that this is His own description of His church. “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for it.”

Of course, here, at the time when the Lord Jesus said this, the church was not actually in existence on the earth; it was born on the day of Pentecost. So neither was it fully formed and perfected; it was not actually the pearl. But this is the Lord’s description of what He was seeking, and of what the church is in His own heavenly mind, a pearl of great price.

If, then, this is a true interpretation, that this ‘pearl’ represents the church, we can pass to the next conclusion, which I think is also beyond debate, that what is true in the Lord’s mind of the whole, should be true in every part. That is, what the church universal is in the mind of the Lord, should be in all its parts locally. If that again is a true interpretation, every local company or part of the Body of Christ should correspond to this description: a pearl, and a pearl of great price.

Very briefly, let us look at some of the features and characteristics of this pearl, as they are included in this description.

First of all, the principle of *selectiveness* is seen at work: “... seeking goodly pearls, and when He had found one ... of great price, He went and sold all that He had, and bought it”. The whole wonderful truth of divine choice, if you like, election, for the moment, selectiveness is here before us in His words; something that the Lord has selected, has chosen, has decided upon, among many other things that He might have of lesser value, as *the* thing that answers to His heart. That great principle and truth of selectiveness, of course, is right at the heart of the revelation that has come to us in the New Testament. “He is a *chosen* vessel unto Me”, said the Lord about Paul. And Paul transferred that very truth to the church: “*chosen* in

Him before the foundation of the world”; “ye are an *elect* race”; something selected by the Lord to serve Him in the satisfaction of His own nature, of His own heart, to fulfil a specific purpose in His eternal counsel. Chosen, selected, *for* something. The Lord’s ‘selectiveness’ is not just that He prefers that, but it is related to something which only that can serve; it is something specific; only the church can do that. He selects as He would select — changing the metaphor — a tool, by which alone He could do a certain piece of work — just that; anything other will not do; it is that.

And I entreat you to lay hold of these things, simple as they may sound, and believe that, if that is true of the church as a whole, it is to be true of any part of the church, anywhere. It is something that has not just come into being willy-nilly, or by any other way than that the Lord chose to have that; the Lord selected that; the Lord picked that out for something. Oh, if that were true, what meaning it would give to everything, would it not? It would place everything upon a basis of meaning and significance, and it would explain so much. That, then, as we go on.

Then, not only selectiveness, but distinctiveness; it is here inherent in this parable in these two short verses. Distinctiveness; this is different: this is something particular, something peculiar, something in itself; it is distinguished. Among all the pearls that might be, this is different. It must be different, both to satisfy Him, and to fulfil His purpose. And you at once realise that that could be followed out along many lines, in many connections. But here again as a part of the great revelation of the church, it is fundamentally and characteristically different; it is not all of a piece with anything and everything else; it is distinguished. His eyes, if we follow the parable, pass over many things, and He says: This is different.

We do need to ask the Lord what that means; we know that the true church is different. But Paul, on more than one occasion, spoke about “the things which differ”, even in the realm of Christianity. You and I need that faculty for discernment and discrimination, insight and perception, to see the things that differ, not just the great difference between the church and the world. Of course there is that, but there are differences in an inner circle between things. And it is just that distinctiveness that the Lord is really after. This is something with a distinctive value, a distinctive character and a distinctive message. This is something which is distinguished as clear-cut, and clearly defined, and not mixed up with a jumble of all sorts of things; it stands out; there is no mistaking the character of this; it is different. You may not be able to explain or define the difference, but the verdict is: it is different. That is true about the church, is it not? We all agree as to the

church according to God's mind, that it is something very distinct and outstanding in God's universe. It has got to be like that in every part of its expression locally.

The next thing: its *preciousness* in the sight of the Lord. "A pearl of great price"; something very precious to the Lord. We know what it cost Him, the price that He paid for it: "Christ loved the church, and gave Himself up for it"; "The church of God which He purchased with His own blood"; and so on; very precious to the Lord.

Do we not need to redeem our mentality regarding the church, and that locally, from cheapness, the commonplace; regarding it too lightly? Or, to put that the other way, do we not need a very much greater conception of how tremendously valuable a true expression of the church is to the Lord. It is priceless! He puts its value like this: "sold *all* that He had". If you can measure that in the case of the Lord Jesus you are approximating to the measure of the value of the church universal and local to the Lord, when it corresponds to His mind. A pearl of great price, very precious.

And when we are talking like that, of course, we are talking about one another, are we not? It is about one another — that is all. It can be put in many ways. Paul put it another way: "The eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you" (1 Cor. 12:21) — we can dispense with you. No, there is nothing cheap in the Body of Christ; nothing that can just be discarded like that, as without value. Each member is "of great price"!

Next, here in this pearl everything is represented: fulness and finality. For this divine Merchantman it was everything; it was not one of a number of things; it was not just a bit better than others; it was not an alternative, that He had 'something else up his sleeve' if it failed. For Him it was everything, and, if it is everything, that is final; there is nothing beyond it.

Now you are familiar enough with all the New Testament teaching about the church to know that it is the 'fulness' of Him. He has nothing extra, that, if it fails, it does not matter so much: 'Well, if it has failed, I have got something else that I can draw upon and put in its place.' No; He has nothing else to take its place; if we fail Him, locally, He hasn't got something to put in our place; He has not got a lot of things in reserve: 'Very well, if that fails, I shall do this.' No, it is everything, and it is final. You see, that gives the sense both of fulness and of permanence, does it not? The Lord will look after what is according to His mind; He will look after that; that is permanent; that is final. If that were taken from Him, everything is

taken from Him, because He has put everything into it. But that means that it represents the finality of the Lord's interest there.

When Israel of old, in the figure of Zion, or Jerusalem, did fail the Lord, in the purpose of its election, the Lord had no alternative, the glory was removed completely. He had no second best; it was all or nothing.

Fullness, finality, with that which has come out of His heart, His church.

And lastly, in all this, in His selectiveness, in its distinctiveness, in its preciousness, in its fulness and finality, is the embodiment of His suffering. The pearl is that; it is the very synonym of suffering; its very being is the result of suffering, a wounding and bleeding; the alchemy of suffering, transmuting, changing. An expression like this, in the church general or local, has to embody His sufferings, not only His sufferings substitutionally — that is, of course, fundamental — but His sufferings constitutionally. As Paul says: "I fill up that which remains of the sufferings of Christ for His Body's sake, which is the church"; the sufferings of Christ for His church. Christ loved and gave. The church is the embodiment of His suffering, but then, on that side, not substitutionally, but constitutionally and vocationally, the church's very life speaks of suffering; it is a costly thing in that way; this is not something that just 'happens'; not just some carefree life. This that is to serve the Lord in this way, in character and purpose, is something realised through its own suffering in fellowship with Him. There is the agony of the pearl in formation, nothing short of agony. And in order to have something like this, I think the Lord of necessity from time to time, has to baptize us afresh into His sufferings, to bring back the agony. It is a painful and distressing thing, but it is a good thing if we are brought to the place where that which is of the Lord where we are concerned, is so precious that it causes us an agony if we see it in any way assailed, in danger of loss. The Lord precipitates that in order to have a pearl, you see; there is no pearl without suffering, in itself. And while the sufferings of Christ are in one sense, His peculiar and unique sufferings in the redemptive sense, there are the sufferings of Christ which are passed to us, into which we are called — the agony for the church.

Have you got any agony for the church? I am sure you have. Real bleeding for the church local, as well as universal. I think perhaps it comes nearer home to us when it is local, but the Lord give us more of this anguish for His church as a whole, as well as for our part of it — suffering for His Body's sake. So that everything is kept on this very practical basis — no mere theory, doctrine and teaching, but an agony, a real travail. And then it will be precious to Him.

It says: “The kingdom of heaven is like a merchantman seeking goodly pearls.” This is a heavenly quest for a heavenly thing and these are the characteristics of a heavenly thing in the eyes and mind of the Lord.

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