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Gates of Pearl

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"And the twelve gates were twelve pearls; each one of the several gates was of one pearl" (Rev. 21:21).

"And the nations shall walk amidst the light thereof: and the kings of the earth bring their glory into it" (Rev. 21:24).

"And he showed me a river of water of life, bright as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb, in the midst of the street thereof. And on this side of the river and on that was the tree of life, bearing twelve manner of fruits, yielding its fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations" (Rev. 22:1-2).

Without staying for details of interpretation, I am assuming that this holy city, new Jerusalem, coming from God out of heaven (Rev. 21:2) is the glorified church in type, and that the church as here represented is constituted by spiritual principles, and thirdly that those principles are the occupation of the Spirit of God with the building of that church spiritually now in this dispensation.

The Outgoings and Incomings by Way of the Gates

Having said that, let us look at these symbolic features which embody the spiritual principles of the church, which principles are to come out in their full meaning eventually in glory. Here in the verses which we have read, we have gates, pearls, nations, kings, and we are given to see the outgoings and the incomings by way of those gates; out to the nations from the city through its gates go the forces of life - life, health to the nations. By way of the gates, an outward ministry of life is carried on. In through the gates the kings bring their glory. It is, of course, a picture of the great ministry which the church is called to fulfil, the people of God in their eternal vocation: by way, by means, of them as a

vessel, life to be poured out to the nations, and they become that which the nations know to be the formed and prepared instrument of their blessing. Then they send back acknowledgment that it is by means of this church that they have come into the good of life, of grace, of fulness. I think that is what is here simply and briefly in principle, and I want to dwell upon that quite simply and briefly.

The nations are seen to be deriving life, health, fulness, from this church constituted by the Holy Spirit on divine principles by way of what is meant by these gates of pearl. We come to that in a moment. The kings of the nations bring their glory in through these gates, their tribute, their own glory, their wealth which has come to them by way of the church, and now they pay tribute, they make acknowledgment, they come back and in effect say: "We have come into what we have come into because of you and we pay that tribute and acknowledge that fact and give thanks; we place our glory upon the grace of God which has been so marvellously manifested in you", and the church becomes, therefore, as the apostle said it was to become, "to the praise of the glory of his grace" (Eph. 1:6). "Unto him be the glory (from the nations) in the church and in Christ Jesus unto all generations for ever and ever" (Eph. 3:21). What will be owing to the church!

The Gates - the Place of Government

But that leads us, of course, to the gates which are for the moment our central object. As you know, in the Old Testament the gates of any city were the place of government. It was there that government was set, in the gates; there that the rule was made known. It was there that life had to come into line with the thoughts of those who were placed in authority. The gates are always symbols of government, and that holds good here. There is a governmental factor bound up with these gates of pearl.

The Governing Factor - Fellowship with Christ in His Sufferings

You see, the divine wisdom having chosen the pearl as the symbol of that which is the way of blessing and the way of glory, at once says that the great governing factor is your fellowship with the sufferings of your Lord. The pearl is the embodiment of anguish, of blood and tears, of suffering. I need not stay to describe the formation of the costly pearl by the anguish of the organism which gives its very life-blood to that marvellous formation. The Lord has seen fit to choose that as the symbol of government which is the very essence of ministry. Government with God is not something official, something autocratic, something domineering, despotic. Government with God is: if you can be a blessing to me in my deep need and distress, you become a real governmental factor in my life. I bow to you, I yield, for in the depths of my distress I can find help nowhere else, and God gives help through you, and I have to say that God has put you in a place of great power and authority in my life; you become a real factor. That is government with God.

It is the principle of the government of the Lord Jesus. He holds His place, not in virtue of any official despotic position. He holds His place as Lord in virtue of His Cross, in virtue of His anguish, and in virtue of His being able to meet need in human lives which could not have been met otherwise and apart from Him, and that makes Him Lord. We bow to Him because of that. That is why in the book of the Revelation everything comes to a Lamb slain. He is in the Throne, He is in the place of supreme power, not because God has put Him there in some official capacity, but because through the Lamb all need is met and all of us are ready to bow to the Lamb because of the ministry that has come to us through His suffering.

That is the principle, the divine principle, of ministry. The only way for the outgoing of life, the outgoing of healing, the outgoing of spiritual fullness is the way of suffering and agony. It is in the fellowship of His sufferings that the church will fulfil her ministry most fully and most truly.

What is true of the church as a whole is, of course, true of every part of it. In such an organism - If "one member suffereth, all the members suffer with it" (1 Cor. 12:26). In some strange, mysterious way it is true, every part is baptized into the sufferings of Christ.

So the question arises: If our lives are to be ways for God's fullness, ways for the outgoing of life, ways for healing, ways for the Lord, we have got to be one with this principle of the pearl. It is going to be blood, it is going to be tears, it is going to be suffering. All this is what our Lord meant when He said, "Whosoever would save his soul shall lose it: and whosoever shall lose his soul for my sake shall find it" (Matt. 16:25). "We ought to lay down our souls for the brethren" (1 John 3:16). Laying down our souls. I know that "life" and "soul" are interchangeable words derived from the same original. I choose "souls" because so often, when you speak of laying down your life, people think of being a martyr in some way, either clubbed to death or burnt alive. No, laying down your soul - it is something every day, it may be spread over a long life, letting go our personal interests, letting go our personal ambitions, suffering in the realm of our soul's keen and terrible disappointments in this life. It means letting go what might rise up, but for our relationship with the Lord, what could be, what no doubt would be if we were not following the Lamb whithersoever He goeth. It is the way of sacrifice, of the sacrifice. How much we would escape if we were not following the Lamb - reproach, sacrifice, discipline.

Those who are going to be the way for the Lord for the pouring out of His real fullness to the enrichment of a wide circle of His interests, those to whom by His grace and in Him there is going to be paid this tribute by the kings of the earth (symbolic language again) and they say: "We owe it, under God, to you, that we have come into this good and this wealth." Those who are going to be in such a position - and this is nothing mythical, it is very real, it comes right near to us - those who are going to be like that are going to know discipline under the hand of God which no one else knows. If you are called nearer to the Lord's side, do not think that that means that it is going to be all blessing and all the gratification of your desires. Not at all! It may be the Lord will handle you much more severely than He will handle anyone else.

Gordon, in one of his "Quiet Talk" series of books, speaks about the Lord not allowing Moses to go into the land, and he gave the picture of generations after, little children sitting upon their father's or mother's knee, hearing the story of Moses, after all his life of suffering and sacrifice, at the end being forbidden by God to go in. They would say, "Oh, that was cruel of God, that was not kind of God", and the parent would say (this is how Gordon put it), "Ah, but you see, Moses was not an ordinary man, and men like Moses cannot do what ordinary men can do; everybody is looking at Moses and everybody has got to see through such a representative man as Moses that disobedience cannot be overlooked." Yes, the Lord deals severely with some of us because we are not just ordinary - may I put it like that? - just ordinary people. This church is no ordinary thing. There is a lot bound up with this church and all its parts and therefore the Lord must be very exacting and we go into sufferings which other people may not know in order that this ministry, this great eternal vocation, might be fulfilled; the outgoings of God like the river of the water of life, the incomings of glory to *Him* in the church from the nations. It is the way of the pearl.

You may be, if you are trying to avoid or evade reproach and persecution and all that sort of thing, you may be sacrificing your very ministry, you may be cutting right across and damming up the very river of the water of life, you may be depriving yourself and your Lord of much glory simply because

you are hiding your light, because to let it shine would bring upon you reproach and suffering and persecution, ostracism and so on. Beware! It is not worth it.

So I say to you, dear friends, the Lord's hand may be upon you in strange ways. He gives and then He seems to take away. He, by a miracle gives an Isaac, and then He says, "Offer him up." Strange ways, the seeming contradictions of God, the mysterious ways. What suffering, what perplexity, but what glory! This is the way of not an ordinary kind of value and ministry - nothing superficial about this. It is *kings* who bring their glory in, people who count for something, people who have come into real values will say, "But it was through you and it was because you were prepared to go the hard way, because you were prepared to know the suffering of your Lord; it was through your sufferings in the grace of God that I am what I am." Kings bring their tribute and the nations derive their life.

You see the principle perfectly clearly, and though we may enlarge, and there is much here, the word is this - the way of enlargement, the way of glory, is the way of suffering, which, though we may think for the time being it means a cutting off, shutting in, narrowing, straitening, depriving, closing doors and so on, God has His marvellous way of bringing about spiritual enlargement even though it may be like that. It may seem like that, that it is something less, something smaller - oh no, not necessarily. It depends on your point of view, whether it is man's or God's, whether it is earth or heaven; heaven's ideas of greatness are very different from earth's, but be assured that if you are knowing the fellowship of His sufferings, whatever that may be, you will know the fellowship in that great ministry of life, of fulness, of wealth, of glory.