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The Lord's Field

by T. Austin-Sparks

First published in "A Witness and A Testimony" magazine, May-June 1949, Vol. 27-3.

"Give ye ear, and hear my voice; hearken, and hear my speech. Doth he that plougheth to sow, plough continually? doth he open and harrow his ground? When, he hath levelled the face thereof, doth he not cast abroad the fitches, and scatter the cummin, and put in the wheat in rows, and the barley in the appointed place, and the spelt in the border thereof? For his God doth instruct him aright, and doth teach him. For the fitches are not threshed with a sharp threshing instrument, neither is a cart wheel turned about upon the cummin; but the fitches are beaten out with a staff, and the cummin with a rod. Bread grain is ground; for he will not be always threshing it: and though the wheel of his cart and his horses scatter it, he doth not grind it. This also cometh forth from the Lord of hosts, who is wonderful in counsel, and excellent in wisdom" (Isa. 28:23-29).

"Moreover the profit of the earth is for all: the king himself is served by the field" (Ecc. 5:9).

Spiritual Agriculture

This is one of the numerous examples and aspects of that great truth that the whole natural creation is intended by God to be a symbolism of heavenly and spiritual things. We know there is a great deal in the Scriptures which sets forth the idea that the Lord's people are to the Lord like a field to be cultivated. Many of the terms of Scripture indicate that, as you know - the Lord's field, the soil, the ground, the seed, the planting of the Lord, the trees of the Lord, and so on. All these terms are symbols of spiritual things. The Lord is cultivating; there is a spiritual agriculture under the hand of the Lord, the great Husbandman. This passage which we have just read in Isaiah brings to us this one thing among others, that, as in the case of Israel, so in the case of the Church - which, of course, involves us all individually - the Lord deals with His people as with a field, or as with a farm, to be

fruitful in various ways, to represent different kinds of satisfaction to Himself. Over and through all, the Lord works to get for Himself satisfaction.

He ploughs. The interrogation here - "Doth he... plough continually?" - is to be carried into the case of Israel, for God was indeed ploughing Israel and was going to make Israel like a ploughed field, and there was going to be some very deep cutting, shearing down deep into the very soul of Israel, laying open and bare and turning over. It was going to be very hard work with Israel. But the Lord in this question says, 'I do not do that sort of thing just for its own sake, and, although that is a very painful aspect of My activities, it is only done with a view to fruitfulness.' The ploughing has its place and its time, it has to be done; that may seem to be destructive, hard, painful, the ruthless activity of the Lord with His people. He is ploughing deep into their souls, making deep furrows in their very being; but that is an aspect and a phase, something which will not go on always. He does not *continually* plough. That will be completed for the time being - but it *will* be completed - and when it is, the Lord gets on with that for which the ploughing is necessary. He gets on with the positive and constructive aspect, the putting in of the seed.

The Lord is after some kind of fruit from every life for His own satisfaction. Even the king is served by the fruit of the field. It comes even to the Lord's table. The Lord lives upon what He produces in our lives.

Fruit Possible on Resurrection Ground Only

I started by saying that the whole of this creation is a symbolism of spiritual things, and that here, in this realm of agriculture, we have very much that indicates what the Lord is after. The very creation itself seems to have this symbolism. You go back to Genesis 1. There you find the earth without form and void, and darkness covering the face of the deep; everything is in chaos; and then on the third day the dry land appears. The third day speaks always of resurrection, and resurrection is out of a chaos. We come to know well enough at some time or other in our lives what a chaos this old creation is. We may have known something of it before we were saved. We may have come to know a little more about it when we were saved, but I think we have been learning ever since we were saved that a far greater chaos lies in the direction of the old creation than ever we imagined. We know the darkness that lies in the natural realm; we know the bareness, the unprofitableness, of this natural life so far as God's satisfaction is concerned. We know that from us in our natural state there is nothing that can come to His table for His pleasure and satisfaction, that we are no field yielding to His pleasure.

But then that great work is done in our union with Christ - "planted together" (Rom. 6:5). You see, it is an agricultural figure again. "If we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection." The third day there was the mighty act of our being raised from the dead with our Lord Jesus; and therein, so to speak, 'the dry land' appears. Here is a new field for the Lord to work upon. And that principle is constantly in operation. It is seen in a crisis, but it is going on all the time; that is, it is also a process by which the Lord brings us more and more on to that resurrection basis where there can be more and more for Him. Death works on one side, and is made to work; there must be the growing realisation of the hopeless mess there, the increasing consciousness of the chaos and the darkness lying over that old creation of ours. Yes, that is death working on the one side, but issuing in resurrection on the other side, where God is going to have more.

The Husbandman's Wisdom

But the point that I want to emphasize is this - the wisdom of God over all this. The farmer carries out the ploughing and other agricultural activities, putting in the seed into its own place. I take it that the meaning of it all is that the Lord Who gives wisdom to this man, this earthly man, is acting with Israel in that kind of wisdom. He is saying, 'What I am doing, I am doing in wisdom; I know what I am doing.' He does that which His infinite wisdom dictates is necessary and which He knows will bring the greatest and best fruit for His satisfaction. 'O Lord, this ploughing, this upheaving, this deep cutting, this furrowing - why is so much of it necessary?' Well, He is "wonderful in counsel." He knows when the ploughing work should go on, and when the ploughing work is done for a season, and so He is governed in His dealings with us by infinite wisdom, having in view the greatest measure of fruit.

Fruit for the King in Terms of Christ

We have our own ideas as to what is fruit for the Lord. So often with us it is a matter of a kind of service and place of service. It is not like that with the Lord. Let us remember that, after all, the fruit that the Lord is after is not so much the fruit of our activities as the quality of our lives. Of course He wants fruitfulness in service, in what we do; but even in that we shall be disciplined. If you think you are going to get away from the plough when you get into the Lord's work, you make a great mistake. Some of us know, after many years of being in the work of the Lord, that we are not away from the plough yet. We are continually being opened up, broken and cut. Yes, the plough comes back into use again from time to time. There is something more yet for the Lord. What is it? Not so much what we may do in service for the Lord, but more that answers to the Lord's mind in life; for, after all, it is Christ that the Husbandman is after, and real fruitfulness is just that Christ is given back to Him in our lives - the fruit of life.

That means death and resurrection, if 'the dry land' appears on the third day. But once the Lord gets us on to resurrection ground, there is something there for Him. I notice in Genesis that, after the record of the appearing of the dry land, nothing is said about the creation of the seeds that were to bring forth the trees and the fruit and the herbs and so on; the land spontaneously yielded, the vegetation grew. The seed was there, and the life was in the resurrection earth. There was something for the Lord in resurrection which spontaneously began to grow; and if we really do go through these processes which bring us on to resurrection ground, there is something there for the Lord which will begin to show of itself. We have not to strain to produce it - it comes. It comes out of the ordeal, it just shows itself, it must manifest itself. The life seed is there and it will grow in the power of that resurrection.

Fruitfulness Governed by Heavenly Ordinances

There is only one other thing I am going to point to at this time in this connection. It is that, on the fourth day, the Lord created the heavenly bodies, sun, moon and stars, so that this earth came under a completely established order of government in heaven; and the continuation of fruitfulness and fruitful seasons was the result of this established government of heavenly bodies. We know that to be true. The seasons are governed by the heavenly bodies, and therefore the fruit of the earth absolutely depends upon the established order of things.

But here we come to see that our fruitfulness for the Lord's satisfaction demands all established order of things in heaven and that we can and must come into it and under it. When the Lord was challenging Job at the end of the story, one of the questions that He put, in order to show that after all Job did not know everything, was - "Knowest thou the ordinances of the heavens?" (Job 38:33). That is a great phrase "the ordinances of the heavens." Translate that spiritually, and you find in the

New Testament that the Church stands related to an established order of things in heaven; and if you and I are going on to a life of full fruitfulness, we shall come up against those ordinances of the heavens. They represent an order that is fixed and heavenly. It has got to govern us. We have to come under it, respond to it; and until we do, the Lord's full purpose in all His effort with us in ploughing and harrowing is arrested; there is no yield, or at best the fruit is limited. There is a heavenly order fixed. I am not going to indicate what those ordinances of the heavens are, but if we are really on resurrection ground, that is, under the government of the Holy Spirit, we shall come up against this and that and another thing which is a fixed heavenly ordinance - something that is established - and response to it, like the earth's response to the sun, will determine the measure of the fruitfulness of our lives.

You have only to walk down the drive here to get plenty of illustration of that. See those distorted, twisted trees down there. The branches are all shapes, and in themselves rather poor things. Why? Because they found themselves in a position where there was not enough light and air, and for their very life's sake they have strained tortuously to reach out to find what they needed; and because they were circumscribed in their movements, and there was not enough light and air for them, they are these poor, twisted, crippled things. They show that there is something of the heavens to which they must come into correspondence, that they must find for their very life and fruitfulness. And of course you have seen in other cases where a tree is in a position to get all the light and air it needs, what a grand tree it is. It is obeying the ordinances of the heavens; it is right in touch with fixed principles of heavenly government.

In His wisdom God has said, 'Now, such-and-such is a heavenly law, a heavenly principle, a heavenly ordinance which is fixed, and you will never yield your full quota of fruit for My satisfaction if you do not recognise that.'

One of the laws is the law of corporate life, of the house of God. If you detach yourself and live as an individual, your measure is limited. And I could indicate many others. The ordinances of the heavens are fixed, and it is going to be a poor lookout for the things of the earth if they are not in line with those ordinances and if there is not a correspondence with them.

We are not concerned with merely *earthly* ordinances. The Lord's Table, for example, can be, and has been, made an earthly ordinance, but it is really an ordinance of the heavens, it is an ordinance of the risen Christ Himself. You may put it aside as a merely earthly ordinance and suffer nothing, but if you come into the realm of resurrection, it takes on a new meaning and new value. This is an ordinance, not of man, not of an ecclesiastical system, but of heaven - something precious and living, from which the Lord gets something. And there are many things like that; the ordinances of the house of God, of corporate life, and so on. They are all established things if, I say again, we are in the Spirit, we come into the line of those wise counsels of God which are working unto fruitfulness.

The Lord knows what He is after, and takes the way with each one of us that will reach His end most effectively. It may be a plough, it may be a harrow; but it is not going to be always the same. Each will have its place and He will turn to other phases; but whatever the phase, it is governed by the wisdom which is seeking for Himself the very answer to His creative activities - that for which He brought this spiritual field into being at all - that the King's table might be served. And He Himself is the King.