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Threshing, and the Lord's Balance

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"Give ye ear, and hear my voice; hearken, and hear my speech. Doth the plowman plow continually to sow? doth he continually open and break the clods of his ground? When he hath made plain 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 corn is ground; for he will not ever be 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, which is wonderful in counsel, and excellent in wisdom" (Isaiah 28:23-39).

"I will proceed to do a marvellous work among this people, even a marvellous work and a wonder: and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hid... They also that err in spirit shall come to understanding, and they that murmur shall learn doctrine" (Isaiah 29:14,24).

"And when they had preached the gospel to that city, and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, and to Iconium, and to Antioch, confirming the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that through many tribulations we must enter into the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:21,22).

This parable that we have read from Isaiah is related particularly to spiritual understanding, in connection with the meaning of the ways of the Lord with His people. The context of the passage is concerned with the faithful company of the Lord's children, who, in the midst of many unfaithful ones, were suffering for their faithfulness. That is always a difficult thing to understand; it is very testing of faith. It was because of this perplexity, in the presence of such suffering, that the Lord gave His servant the word of this parable.

The general meaning of the parable is clear enough. Men apply to natural processes their inborn or acquired wisdom - wisdom born either of instinct or of experience - as to what should be done with this and that, when it should be done, and how it should be done; but they often fail to recognise two things. Firstly, that the wisdom by which they are so acting has come from God - 'This also cometh from the Lord'; and secondly, that, behind the very things that they are doing, expressing the wisdom or knowledge that they have acquired, whether by learning, by experience, or by training - behind what they are doing, because it is God-given wisdom, there is a spiritual meaning. They do many things, and they do not see the spiritual meaning of the things they are doing. I have often felt, and sometimes said, that I wish that all the experts in the different realms of knowledge and science - medicine, biology, physics, and so on - could see through their expert knowledge to the spiritual interpretation. Isaiah is saying here, that behind things that are done in nature - in this case, the operations of agriculture - there are spiritual meanings.

The Meaning of the Plough

At the beginning: "Doth the plowman plow continually to sow?" Well, the answer of common sense is, No, of course he does not! He would be a madman if he ploughed, and then went on ploughing all through the year; if he did nothing else but plough, or harrow his ploughed ground. Does he do that continually? No; it is a job that has got to be done - the breaking up, the turning over, the exposing to the elements, the harrowing - it is an essential operation, but it is not continued indefinitely. It is something to be done, but it has its time and place, its beginning and its end.

The Lord is speaking to His faithful people who are feeling that they are under the plough; furrows are being cut deep into their souls; they are being turned up and turned over, laid bare, exposed, broken, harrowed. The Lord says, even to faithful people: 'This is necessary we are looking ahead to a harvest, to real values; this is an essential aspect of the work. But... take this comfort: this is not going on for ever.' Under the hand of the Lord it is periodic, and it is timed. It comes into the individual life of the child of God; it comes into the life of a company of the Lord's people; and, as history shows, it comes into the experience of the whole Church. From time to time, down through the centuries, it seems that the action of God once more is cutting deep, overturning, breaking up. It is the hard way toward some fresh harvest. But the word of the Lord is: 'My dear people, remember this: I am the Man with His hand on the plough: I have this whole thing in hand, it will not go on for ever.' It is something necessary - everybody will agree with it in nature; we agree with it, surely, in grace - but it has its time limit; and when that phase is accomplished, the Lord terminates it, and says: Now, that is done and we can get on with the next thing.

The Sowing of the Seeds

Now the parable goes on with the seed. You notice that four kinds of seed are mentioned here. And it is a very interesting thing, though it is difficult to detect this in our translation, that the verbs used are chosen definitely and specifically in relation to the kind of seed. Fitches, the 'love-in-a-mist' or

'devil-in-a-bush' of our gardens, the smallest of them all, are sown broadcast. The 'cummin' is also very small, but a little larger. The fitches are said to be just 'scattered'; but for the cummin another verb is used: it is 'distributed', sown more carefully than the other. And when you come to the barley and the wheat, it is 'dropped' into holes; it is given more particular care as to where it is put. It is not just broadcast; it is planted.

Now, probably you can see something through that. The Lord's people vary. I do not think that the parable is intended to discriminate in values. Everything has its own value, and everything has its own worth, its own significance. It is all a part of the great harvest. But supposing we look at the fitches and the cummin, not as something of less importance, but perhaps as those who are smaller, shall we say, in the immature or child stage. I think they comprise by far the larger number of the Lord's people, scattered abroad. They are the Lord's people in general, scattered broadcast over the earth - "the field is the world" (Matt. 13:38) - and because they have not come yet to a point of greater maturity, or to the phase where something more is to be realised, the Lord deals with them in His own gracious way.

The Harvesting of the Seeds

Notice what follows: how the fitches and the cummin are dealt with in one way; the wheat and the barley are dealt with in quite another way. To the little fitches and cummin no cart wheel is taken; no threshing machine is employed; it only just needs the gentle tap of the rod. So easily is the work done with these that the harder dealings of the threshing-floor are not called for. They are but children. Now, is this not true of the Christian life? Sometimes you wonder why some people get away so easily; so many Christians get off with it so lightly; the Lord does not seem to deal with them as He deals with others - perhaps with you. Well, all right, their time has not come. Of course all parables break down, you cannot change fitches into wheat; this is where all parables have their limitations. Within a certain general realm, where there is the intrinsic value to the Lord, the Lord's dealings, for the time being, are apparently very light and easy-going; it is just the staff, it is just the rod, it is just a pull-up here and there, without anything very drastic. The Lord deals with people according to their measure. At a certain stage their measure is this, and the Lord deals with them accordingly.

A Question of Measure

But, immediately the question of greater measure, and greater value, comes into view (sometimes that comes into view very early; sometimes it seems to take much longer) - as soon as greater values, like wheat and barley, come into view, the handling of the Lord is very much more drastic. "Bread corn is ground". If it is a question of the value of 'bread', then those who are going to be 'bread', that is, food, for the people of God, are going to have very drastic handling by the Lord. If you feel the Lord is handling you in that way, bruising, hammering, using the flail on you, I say it to you emphatically, that is a hopeful sign. The Lord is meaning something more of value in your life for others. It is 'bread' corn that is bruised.

Many young Christians do not understand when we speak to the Lord's more mature people about the difficulties and the sufferings of the Christian life. They think that we are a bit morbid, and making the Christian life something complicated and hard. To any such young Christians I would say: If you are the Lord's, the Lord will deal with you appropriately to where you are spiritually. He will not be too hard on you; He may be very gentle with you, He may just correct you with the rod, quite

lightly, because so far you are just in that category of the 'fitches' and the 'cummin'. But remember, it may not always be like that. The Lord who wants the most, and whose heart is set upon 'bread' for His people - that over the whole earth His people should receive strength, sustenance, building up, through your ministry, individually or collectively - if it is going to be like that, to satisfy that desire of His heart, you are going to have a difficult time; you are going through the 'threshing-floor'; you are going to know the 'bruising'.

If the Lord is not able to do that, and He has to keep us on the elementary, easy-going basis, where we are all having a happy time, and the Lord very rarely does anything corrective and stringent, it is not a compliment to our spiritual life. It may just mean that He is not able to do all that He would do if He could in this great need of bread. So, if He really does turn His cart-wheel upon us, if the hoofs of the horses stamp upon us, if the flail gets to work, it is because He is looking upon us as bread-corn, something by which He is going to serve Himself in the interest of others.

An Explanation of Discipline

That, very briefly and imperfectly, is Isaiah's parable. Now, if you look, you will see how that worked out with this company. The suffering remnant - suffering not because of their own unfaithfulness, but because of the unfaithfulness of the nation as a whole, suffering under the Lord's hand, being dealt with, disciplined - it was that remnant which was the Lord's key to the whole later situation. It has always been like that. The key to the situation of all the Lord's people is a remnant, a company, who suffer together with Him, and who allow themselves to go through the discipline that is necessary.

What is the Lord saying, perhaps to you, in the parable? Perhaps you have had a harder time than many people, and you do not understand it. You have perhaps said: Is this necessary to the Christian life? Look at all these other Christians; they do not have my difficulties and troubles. Well, the parable explains it. The whole point of this parable is spiritual understanding. The Lord deals with His people in different ways. Yes, these others are His people, but, but... so far they just cannot serve Him in the way in which He wants to be served, and so He is dealing with them, quite gently, in their category, in their measure; but you may be chosen to something more.

The idea has been very common in Christianity, that it is a great and wonderful thing to be 'mightily used of the Lord!' Oh, to be a great evangelist! Oh, to be a great teacher! Oh, to be a great Christian worker! Let me tell you, that is an entirely false conception. The truth is that those who serve the Lord most truly go through the deepest suffering. The balances are truly kept by God - extra suffering, extra usefulness; little suffering, little usefulness. That is how God keeps His balances, and that is what is here, implicit in this story. You may be having a more or less easy time. I do not want to dishearten you by saying it may not always be so, but if you really want to be of greater use to the Lord, remember it may be by a deeper discipline of the Lord. And if you are having a particularly difficult time, most likely it is because the Lord is going to meet need more fully through you.