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Sermon Study on Isaiah 28:23-29

A PARABLE OF GOD'S HUSBANDRY

By WALTER R. ROEHRS

"All these things spake Jesus unto the multitude in parables; and without a parable spake He not unto them" (Matt. 13:34). He used "earthly stories with heavenly meaning" that have no equal. "Never man spake like this Man" (John 7:46), because "He taught them as One having authority and not as the scribes" (Matt. 7:29). But holy men, moved by the Holy Ghost, also used this teaching device with telling effect. The Old Testament parables are perhaps not so well known. They commend themselves for pulpit use because they present familiar lessons in a different setting. The pastor may want to use them for a series of evening sermons.

A PARAPHRASE

God has something important to tell you. *Give ye ear, and hear my voice; hearken, and hear my speech.*

You can learn this lesson by watching the tiller of the soil. As you observe him going about his work, you realize that he knows what he is doing. He has intelligence which enables him to do things for a purpose and to plan his work for the result that he has in mind. When it is time to sow, you see him preparing the soil. *But does the plowman keep plowing all the time? Is he forever opening and harrowing his ground?* The answer is no. He does not plow merely to turn over the soil; he does not harrow merely to cut up the ground. He does this with an end in view. *After leveling the surface of the ground, doth he not cast abroad the fitches, and scatter the cummin, and set the wheat in rows and the barley in the appointed place and the rye in its place?*

The farmer is able to plan and do one thing to achieve another because his Creator has endowed him with this gift. *For his God doth instruct him to discretion and doth teach him.*

Watch the farmer also at the time of harvest for further evidence of his ability to act intelligently. He knows that he can't treat all his crops alike if he is to have the desired results. If he does not act with discrimination, he would ruin his

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harvest, and so he adjusts the method of threshing to the various crops. *For the fitches are not threshed with a threshing instrument, neither is a cartwheel turned about upon the cummin; but the fitches are beaten out with a staff, and the cummin with a rod.*

Again notice that, guided by his intelligence, he does not overdo his threshing. He knows when to stop dragging the sledge over the wheat lest he destroy the grain. *He will not forever be threshing it, nor break it with the wheel of his cart, nor bruise it with his horsemen. Bread corn is bruised, yes, it is true, but just enough to free it from the hull which encumbers it, no more. He does not crush it.*

And now apply this parable to God's dealings with you. *If this also cometh forth from the Lord of Hosts, if the farmer knows how to plan to achieve his purpose because God doth instruct him to discretion and doth teach him, is it not reasonable to suppose that divine husbandry is also carefully planned for a purpose? Yes, it is even in a much higher degree. God does plan your life carefully, purposefully, with individual discrimination, because He is wonderful in counsel. He can do the right thing at the right time in the right measure because He is excellent in working.*

HOMILETICAL SUGGESTIONS *

This parable uses the tiller of the soil as a *tertium comparationis*, but the lesson to be learned is different from that of the sower of the seed spoken by Jesus. Here the emphasis is on the intelligent planning and the discretion of the farmer. Those activities of the farmer are stressed which might appear drastic, violent, and even destructive. Why does he lacerate and wound the earth by plowing and harrowing? Why does he treat his crops so violently at threshing time?

The answer is that he engages in these activities not for their own sakes. Being endowed by his Creator with the ability to plan and to execute for a purpose, he does certain things to achieve the end that he has in mind. He does not plow just to be cutting up the countryside. He does not harrow merely to see the clods break up into small pieces. This is evident from the fact that he does not keep on plowing

* The order of the presentation here is merely one of convenience. The sermonizer begins with the study of the text and the context.

and harrowing forever. He engages in this seemingly destructive activity as a means to an end: he wants to sow seed which is to grow into sturdy plants and bear fruit.

Again at harvesttime he does not keep on threshing just to be threshing. He beats his crops with a staff and rolls the wheel of his cart upon them not merely to subject them to violence. He engages in this activity for the sole purpose of getting the crop safely into his granary.

A second example of the farmer's God-given ability to plan purposefully and to execute intelligently appears in the discrimination that he exercises. To treat his crops alike would be ruinous. When he has cummin and other small-seeded crops before him on the threshing floor, he does not use the heavy, spiked threshing sledge that he applies when he is harvesting the larger crops. He adjusts his treatment to the crop.

And, finally, the farmer is endowed by God to know when he has achieved his purpose. He knows when to quit threshing. Even when he uses the heavy instruments, he stops before he has crushed the grain. There is just enough threshing to free the wheat from the hull and to gather it into his storehouse.

That's the earthly story. The application is one of *a minori ad maius*. It is already suggested in v. 26, which stresses the fact that it is God who has given the tiller of the soil a mind that can plan and discriminate. Is it not reasonable to suppose that God Himself can and does deal with men in the same way? The answer is an emphatic yes. The Lord of Hosts is wonderful in counsel and excellent in working.

The parable focuses our attention on only one aspect in the planning of our lives by God. We usually do not need to be reminded that the things which we consider good come to us by divine providence. However, when the bitter moments come, we need the instruction and the comfort that "this also cometh from the Lord of Hosts." They do not overtake us because we are the victims of a blind fate. They happen, not because God could not prevent their happening. They come because God has planned them for His good purpose.

The staff and the rod are used in other figurative language of Scripture as implements of God's chastisement. Our

English word *tribulation* comes from the Latin *tribulum*, a threshing sledge. We also speak of "harrowing" experiences. The plow is an instrument for cutting.

The chief thoughts of the parable fall into place quite readily:

TRIBULATIONS COME FROM GOD

- A. He plans them to achieve a good purpose.
- B. He plans them in proportion to the individual needs.
- C. He plans them not to exceed our endurance.

The sermon may deal with the tribulations in general in the life of the child of God. The text can also be applied to comfort those stricken by specific and very severe strokes of adversity, for example, as a funeral sermon at the occasion of an "untimely" death.

Or the preacher may want to widen the sphere of God's husbandry to take in the acre of national or world events; in fact, this application follows most closely from the context. In the previous verses the Prophet pronounces the doom of destruction upon Judah. "The twenty-eighth chapter of the book of Isaiah is one of his greatest prophecies. It is distinguished by that regal versatility of style which places its author at the head of Hebrew writers." (G. A. Smith, *The Book of Isaiah*, Volume I, p. 153.) In withering rhetoric he denounces the sins of the nation and writes God's *finis* over it. But there is a "residue of His people." There is a faithful remnant. For their comfort this parable is appended. There is no doubt that a sermon on this text would mean much to the children of God in devastated Europe and Asia. As a nation we may need it, too.

EXEGETICAL NOTES

V. 23. After Jesus had spoken the Parable of the Sower, He added similar words: "Who hath ears to hear, let him hear," Matt. 13:9. Cf. also Ps. 49:1 and 78:1.

V. 24. *Kol hayyom*, translated by the A. V. "all day." The emphatic adverbial modifier is placed first. Luther translates better: "immerdar"; also R. V.: "continually." It is the poetic expression for the more prosaic *kol hayyamim*: all the days. It is translated by the A. V. with "continually," "daily," "forever," in such passages as Ps. 42:3, 10; 52:1; 56:1-2, etc.—The verbs, in the imperfect tense, denote the repeated action:

we see the plowman cutting furrow after furrow and making round after round. — *Yepatach*: this verb takes up the more usual word for plowing used in the first part of the verse. The A. V. translates it quite literally: "Doth he open?" that is, "the ground." While it is used in the sense of plowing only here in the Old Testament, it is quite commonly employed for the work of the engraver: Ex. 28:9, 36; 1 Kings 7:36; 2 Chron. 2:6, 13, etc. — *Wisaddedh*: "and he breaks," that is, the "clods" (A. V.). The word "clods" is not in the text, but is correctly supplied. The verb comes from the root meaning to be straight, even, level. The causative form gives the meaning: to make even, to level. In Job 39:10 the A. V. translates: "Canst thou bind the unicorn with his band in the furrow? or will he harrow the valleys after thee?" In Hosea 10:11: "Break his clods."

V. 25. *'Im shiwwah*: "When he hath made plain" (A. V.). This verb has as its first meaning: to put, place, set; then, to put in order, to make even. R. V.: "After leveling its surface." — For a description of fitches, cummin, barley, rye, cf. a Bible dictionary. The difference in the nature and size of these seeds is not so important here as in vv. 27-28, except to indicate that the farmer plans the planting and prepares the soil individually for each. — *Sorah*: "the principal wheat" (A. V.). This translation is based on the meaning of the root: to set in a row, range in order, and then to be first in the row, to be chief, leader. The parallelism suggests the use of the word as an adverbial accusative: to set the wheat in rows. In the Orient wheat is often planted thus. The LXX omits. Jerome: *per ordinem*. — *Nisman*: "the appointed barley." The form of the word is a Niphal participle. It means to be marked off, designated, and is likewise best construed adverbially: in the appointed place. Luther combined these two modifiers, reproducing the meaning correctly: "saet Weizen und Gerste, jegliches wo er's hin haben will."

V. 26 already hints at the application: it is God who makes it possible for the farmer to work intelligently. *Weyissero*: "doth instruct him." The verb in its more usual meaning implies a drastic teaching: to chastise, punish by blows, and it is so translated by the A. V. in Deut. 22:18; 1 Kings 12:11; Prov. 19:18, etc. Or the chastening may be in words: to admonish, exhort, as in Prov. 9:7; Job 4:3; Ps. 16:7. Hence

Luther made this verse apply directly to God's visitation upon His people by making a plural of the third person singular suffix: "also zuechtiget sie auch ihr Gott." It seems preferable to make the verb have the more general connotation of teaching, instructing, which is reflected in the second verb in this verse, just as *yasar* is bracketed with *lamadh* in Ps. 94:10. The context demands that the object of the instruction be the plowman. At the same time this word keeps contact with the whole question under consideration: God uses the rod at times to educate His children. *Lammishpat* — A. V.: "to discretion"; R. V.: "aright"; Luther: "durch Recht." In Jer. 30:11 and 46:26 the same verb and prepositional phrase occurs: "I will correct thee in measure." If the latter is a correct rendition, then the blending of parable and application in this verse becomes still clearer. It also connects what has gone before with the following illustration from the work of the farmer. If the sentence is merely to present the thought that man has received the ability to act judiciously, then the phrase could very well be translated: His God instructs him to do the right thing. I prefer the latter. Strack-Zoekler: "er hat ihn unterwiesen zum rechten Brauch, es unterrichtete ihn sein Gott."

V. 27. The *ki*, "for," introduces the proof of the rational ability of the farmer to discriminate. The difference in the threshing implements used is important. For a description compare a Bible dictionary.

V. 28. *Lechem*, literally, "bread"; "grain" is to be supplied. The larger grain used for flour is meant in distinction from the smaller leguminous produce just mentioned. *Yudaq* is a Hophal from the root *duq*. Its primary meaning is to beat, bruise in pieces, tread, trample, crush; then to tread out grain by driving cattle upon the grain, cf. Jer. 50:11; Hos. 10:11; 1 Chron. 21:20. The last verb in this verse, *yeduqqennu*, is derived from the kindred root *daqaq*. Gesenius suggests that it is used in a play upon a twofold usage and translates: "Bread-corn is *beaten out*, but yet one does not thresh it always . . . nor does he *crush* it." This appears to be more in keeping with the contrast that is implied than to translate the first part in the form of a question: "Is bread-corn crushed? Nay, but one does not thresh it forever . . . and does not crush it." In either case the meaning is clear. There is

a progression of thought from the preceding verse. It is true the farmer uses the heaviest machinery for some grains, but even in that case he stops his threshing before he has ground the kernels to dust. Luther does not agree: "man mahlt es, dass es Brot werde." — The infinitive absolute *adosh* occurs only here. — Haman: to put in motion with the derived meaning: to put in commotion, to discomfit, to destroy utterly. Here the meaning must be to impel the wheel with its crushing power. — God's severe visitation on Israel had been compared by the Prophet to threshing in Chap. 21:10: "O my threshing and the corn of my flour!"

V. 29. This verse takes up v. 26 and points out again the fact that man derives his power of discretion and discrimination from God: "This also cometh from the Lord of Hosts," and then adds that God possesses in the highest degree what He teaches His creature. He is "wonderful in counsel." *Etsah* is used first of all of a purpose or plan, Is. 19:3; 29:15; Jer. 18:23. With the verb *asah* it means: to execute a counsel, to carry out a purpose, Is. 30:1, etc. Then it also has the connotation of counsel as a quality of mind: deliberation, prudence, wisdom, cf. Is. 11:2; Prov. 8:14; Jer. 32:19. God can plan; yes, His thoughts are above ours as the heaven is higher than the earth. The Messiah is called Wonderful, Counselor. But God is not only a dreamer of dreams, He can put His thoughts into effectual working; He is "excellent in working." While the word *tushiyyah* is a synonym of *etsah* in the sense of counsel, wisdom, understanding, it appears to have the further connotation of carrying out a purpose, undertaking, enterprise. Thus Job 5:12: "Their hands cannot perform their enterprises." Luther: "und fuehret es herrlich hinaus."

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