

*THE PARABLE OF THE PLOUGHMAN AND THE  
THRESHER.*

ISAIAH xxviii. 23-29.

THE Jehovah of the Old Testament too commonly shapes Himself to us as an austere and jealous God, who visits the iniquities of the fathers upon their children even to the third and fourth generation. That this is one aspect of his character, and that He is placed before us in this aspect by the Scriptures themselves, is beyond question. But it is not the only aspect of his character, nor is it the only aspect in which He is presented to us. And as there is no more fruitful source of misapprehension than taking a part for the whole, so we never misapprehend God more grossly than when we infer his whole character from a single aspect of it, and that not the largest, not the ruling aspect. The Hebrew Scriptures do, unquestionably, affirm that God afflicts men for their sins, that He is angry with them every day; but they also affirm that in the midst of wrath He remembers mercy, and that the very punishments of sin are designed to redeem men from their sins. Open these Scriptures where we

will,—in the Law, in the Prophets, in the Psalms,—and wherever we find a denunciation of judgment, there we are also taught that behind the dark clouds of judgment there smiles a heaven of redeeming love; and the most exquisite and familiar passages of the Old Testament are precisely those in which the saving mercy of God is depicted as shining through those clouds. As we study its pages we are more and more profoundly convinced that Jehovah both is, and is not, an austere and jealous God; that He does visit men for their iniquities, but that the punishments He inflicts are intended for correction, and not for destruction. His wrath is as truly a saving wrath as his love is a saving love.

This double aspect of his character, as Judge and Redeemer, as judging that He may redeem, is set forth by the prophet Isaiah in a parable which is not familiar to most readers of the Bible, I think, although it deserves to be familiar, since it expresses the merciful and redeeming purpose of the Divine judgments in a simple, yet beautiful and impressive, form. The parable is not easy to translate, or so to translate as to convey the Hebrew thoughts in good English idioms; but the following translation will suffice, perhaps, to convey the meaning, if not the beauty, of the Original:

23. Give ye ear, and hear my voice;  
Attend, and hearken unto my speech.
24. Does the ploughman *always* plough?  
For sowing he lays open and harrows his ground.
25. When he hath levelled the surface thereof,  
Doth he not scatter the dill,  
And strew the cummin,  
And set the wheat in frows,

- The barley in the place marked out for it,  
 And the spelt along the edge of the field?
26. For his God teacheth him to act with discretion ;  
 He instructeth him.
27. For the dill is not threshed with a sledge,  
 Nor is the wheel of the wain rolled over the cummin ;  
 But the dill is beaten out with a switch,  
 And the cummin with a flail.
28. Bread-corn must be bruised ;  
 But he will not go on threshing it for ever,  
 Nor (for ever) vex it with the wheel of his wain,  
 Nor crush it under the hoofs of his horses.
29. This also cometh from the Lord of hosts,  
 Who giveth (him) a marvellous sagacity and high  
 understanding.

(1.) The general drift of the Parable is obvious. The husbandman does not for ever vex and wound the tender bosom of the earth with the keen edge of the ploughshare or the sharp teeth of the harrow. He ploughs *only that he may sow* ; he harrows the ground only that he may produce a level and unclodded surface on which to cast his seeds. And when he sows, he gives to every seed its appropriate place and usage. He scatters the dill<sup>1</sup> and strews the cummin<sup>2</sup> broadcast ; but the wheat he sets, according to the Oriental fashion, in long rows, and the barley in a place specially marked out for it, so marked as to exclude the borders of the field : and here, along the edges of the field, where it is most likely to be bitten or trampled by passing beasts, he sows the less valuable spelt.<sup>3</sup> In short, he ploughs and harrows only that he may sow and

<sup>1</sup> The black cummin.

<sup>2</sup> The cummin is an umbelliferous plant, with leaves like those of fennel, and aromatic seeds resembling those of the poppy, which were used both as a condiment and a medicine.

<sup>3</sup> The 'shorn corn,' or 'hairless corn,'—so called from its shorn and smooth appearance, its beardlessness.

plant; and when sowing-time has come, he deals with every seed after its kind, giving it its appropriate place and treatment. And this he does because God has given him discretion, and has taught him by experience how to handle the soil and the seeds so as to produce the most abundant results. Is God, then, less wise than the husbandman whom He has taught?

So, again, when the harvest is gathered in, the wise husbandman still varies and adapts his means to his end. When he would thresh out the light aromatic seeds of the black and the grey cummin, he does not crush them under the heavy rollers of the threshing-sledge,<sup>1</sup> nor does he drive the ponderous and serrated wheels of the threshing-waggon over them, but he strikes them lightly with a switch or other slender flail. "Bread-corn," indeed, "must be bruised;" but even when the sledge, or the waggon, is driven over it, to separate the grain from the chaff, or when the horses are led to and fro on the threshing-floor, to tread out the grain with their feet, the discreet husbandman takes care that the process is not prolonged until the grain itself is crushed. He does not go on threshing "for ever;" his single aim is to separate the chaff from the wheat, to save as much of the grain as he can, and to save it in the best condition he can, that it may be gathered into his garner. And he thus varies his modes of treatment, and adapts them to the several kinds of seeds, because God has given him sagacity and wisdom. Will God, then,

<sup>1</sup> Heavy wooden rollers in which sharp stones were inserted, to split and bruise the husks and to liberate the corn.

who gave the husbandman this sagacity, be less observant of time and measure? Will He crush and waste the precious grain of his threshing-floor?

(2.) The general drift of the Parable is obvious enough. Nor is the historical application of it difficult to recover. The prophet Isaiah fell on evil times. He had to warn and admonish the chosen nation at a period in which they were utterly corrupt, when the judges took bribes and the priests mocked at the word of the Lord, and the very prophets saw "lying visions," or pretended to see them, and the people had made a covenant with Death and Hades. He had to threaten them with disaster on disaster,—with the horrors of famine, of civil war, of foreign invasion, of captivity in a strange land. So corrupt were they, however, that they made a jest of him for his fidelity to their King and God. In their drunken carousals the priests and prophets mimicked and burlesqued the simplicity and directness of his speech, and turned his warnings into a theme for laughter and derision.<sup>1</sup> But even in this godless and scoffing age there was a "remnant," faithful among the faithless, who were true to God and to the word which He sent by the Prophet. Were *they* to be consumed in the fire of the Divine indignation against the popular sins? Or, if they were preserved, were they to stand by, and see the elect nation destroyed out of its place? Was there no hope for them? none even for the nation at large?

There *was* hope; and that they might see it and be sustained by it in the cloudy and dark day of judgment, Isaiah discloses to them, in his parable,

<sup>1</sup> Isaiah xxviii. 9-11, in the Original.

the secret of the Divine administration,—viz., that judgment is mercy, and that it prepares the way for a mercy more open and full than itself. Israel is Jehovah's field. When it is overrun with weeds, it must be ploughed up; and when it is ploughed, the clods must be broken and levelled by the harrow. But will the Divine Husbandman be always ploughing? Has He no end beyond that? He ploughs only that He may sow. He afflicts the sinful only that He may cleanse them from their sins and make them fruitful in all goodness. *This* is Isaiah's message concerning the bulk of the nation. Corrupt and degraded as they are, God will not abandon them to their corruptions; He will chasten and redeem them by judgments keen and searching as the ploughshare: the calamities which are coming upon them are designed to correct them, to recover them, to make them fruitful in good works.

But the Prophet has a message to the faithful Remnant, as well as to the nation at large. And *to them* his message is, that even the good grain must be threshed, that even those who are faithful to Jehovah must share in the judgments which are about to fall on the entire nation. They cannot be exempted from the misery of the time; they must suffer, as for their own sins, so also for the sins of their neighbours. But this is their comfort, that the Divine Husbandman measures out his strokes with wisdom and grace. He does not thresh the more tender plants with the heavy sledge or the heavier waggon. And even the strongest plants will not be crushed beneath the ponderous wheels, or torn to pieces by the sharp edges, or destroyed beneath the

trampling hoofs. Not a single grain of any good herb will be lost, or crushed, or burned up with the chaff and the straw. God is but separating that which is good in those whom He loves from that which is evil and imperfect in them; and, even in this process of separation, He will not lay upon them more than they are able to bear. Their weeping will be but for a night; joy will come in the morning: the *day* of vengeance will usher in the acceptable *year* of the Lord. Terrible as the judgment may be, it is sent in mercy,—sent both to redeem the sinful and to make them perfect who stay their souls on God.

(3.) So that, in this Parable, the mystery of the Divine Providence is laid open, its secret disclosed. *All ploughing is for sowing; all threshing is intended for the preservation of the grain.* When God chastens us, it is not because He means to destroy us, but because He has set his heart on saving us, because He has appointed us to life, and not to death.

Nor are the ordinances and chastenings of his Providence arbitrary and without discrimination. He employs various methods, sends “sorrows of all sorts and sizes,” that He may adapt Himself to every man’s needs, and to all our varieties of place, time, and circumstance. Just as the husbandman varies his treatment of the soil, and allots to each kind of seed a soil and place suitable to its kind; just as, after the harvest has been gathered in, he employs only such instruments as are best adapted for separating the different kinds of grain from the straw and the chaff: so, with like wisdom and dis-

cretion, God deals with us, assigning to each of us our proper station and lot, and, when we sin against Him, adapting his judgments to our several needs. The sorrows, losses, bereavements which befall us are but as the sharp edge of the share or the keen teeth of the harrow, and are intended to prepare us to receive the good seed and to bring forth much fruit. Or, again, they are like the stroke of the flail, or the keen pressure of the sledge, or the ponderous oppression of the waggon-wheel, or the swift rattle of the horses' hoofs; and are designed to separate the chaff from the grain, the worthless from the worthy, the evil from the good in us, that we may be made meet for the garner of God.

"Cure sin, and you cure sorrow," say the reason and conscience of the World: *and the sorrow comes that the sin may be cured*, adds the Prophet; the very miseries that spring from evil are intended to eradicate the evil from which they spring. The weeds call for the plough; and the plough comes at their call: but it comes, and cuts up the weeds and the ground in which they have taken root, only that the seeds of wholesome herbs and herbs of grace may be sown in the furrows. The chaff calls for the flail; and the flail is sent, but sent only to beat out the nourishing grain.

It was in the strength of this sublime conception of the ministry of pain and sorrow that the Hebrew prophets met the terrible miseries they were called to endure and behold. Would that this conception were as assured, and as familiar, to us as it was to them! For, sooner or later, we all have to endure sorrows which rend our hearts as the ploughshare



rends the ground, or which bruise our hearts as the flail bruises the corn. And even when our hearts are torn and bruised by no sorrows of our own, we have to look on, as best we may, while our neighbours and friends are torn and bruised by pangs which we are powerless to heal. Often men suffer for their sins who, nevertheless, have much in them that is good and of good promise : and how can we but grieve for them ? how can our grief but be bitter and hopeless unless we believe that God is ploughing up their hearts in order that He may give them fertility again, and cast the seed of the kingdom into the furrows ? Often the innocent and godly suffer ; at times they are afflicted with keen and long-drawn miseries which it almost maddens us to witness. How can we but grieve for them ? how can we but burn with an impotent anger and resentment, unless we believe that God is either purging them that they may bring forth more fruit, or that He is separating the grain from the straw in order that He may gather the grain into his garner,—in the last resort, disengaging the soul from the weak hindering flesh, that our friends may dwell with Him amid the sanctities of an everlasting peace ?

There is no comfort, or no sufficient comfort, for us under the changes, sorrows, and separations of this mortal life, apart from the conviction that God is seeking, by these, to make us fruitful, and to make the world fruitful, in all virtue and holiness. But if we may fold this conviction to our hearts, as we may ; if we may conceive of God as a Divine Husbandman who ploughs only that He may sow, and threshes only that He may gather the ripe grain

into his storehouse, then the painful mystery of Providence is no longer painful to us, no longer a mystery even: and we, like the holy Apostle, shall know both how to be full and how to be hungry, how to abound and how to suffer need; how to be poor, yet make many rich; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; chastened, yet not broken down; dying, yet, behold, we live.

S. COX.

PRECEPT UPON PRECEPT.

ISAIAH xxviii. 7-13.

As few passages of Scripture are oftener quoted than the tenth verse of this Chapter, it is, to say the least of it, *unfortunate* that it should be misquoted almost as often as it is quoted. Still more unfortunately, it is commonly used in a sense the very opposite to that in which it was originally employed. It is commonly taken as a grave description of the abundance and variety of the means of grace which God has vouchsafed to the Church; whereas it is, really, a drunken sneer at the poverty and simplicity of the means vouchsafed to the Church of Isaiah's time. How often have we been urged, in sermons, to admire the grace of God who, in condescension to our needs, has spoken to us at sundry times in divers manners—giving us 'precept on precept, precept on precept, line on line, line on line, a little here, and a little there!' How often have we heard good men, in their prayers, thank God that He had thus graciously condescended to our infirmity, repeating one and the same truth, in