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Email: info@austin-sparks.net

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## Spiritual Ploughing

*by T. Austin-Sparks*

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*"But Jesus said unto him, No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62).*

I have just had a couple of days at the farm and during that time I saw some ploughing, and afterward when we were back indoors this text came up, and we were told that, in its actual terms it is quite out of date, for modern ploughing is not done with the eye looking on. You have to look around, and especially back, in modern ploughing, but the principle is the same. The principle, of course, governs the heart. In the East you must keep your eye ahead to plough a straight furrow, and if you look back you spoil the work. Now you do not do that literally, but I say the principle is the same. If the heart looks back, everything does go wrong and all fitness for the kingdom is spoiled. This is a word which truly gathers up what Paul said about the Scripture - that it is "for reproof, for correction, for instruction" (2 Tim. 3:16). There are all those elements in this - *"No man having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God"*.

### **Hard Work**

Let us think for a moment of the work of ploughing as we have seen it in these days. It is by far the most difficult and the heaviest work that anyone might contemplate. For one thing it is at a time of the year when things are most difficult. The elements are far from helpful, everything seems to make this work hard. Ploughing is indeed heavy work. Against everything the plough and the

ploughmen have to force their way. Ploughing in Winter is a lonely thing. There is nothing very much to inspire. It is not the time when the birds are singing and the trees are budding and all the signs of new life are in evidence. All that is absent. It is a desolate time, a lonely time, nothing whatever on the outside to inspire. Such is the time of ploughing.

If that is true in the natural world - and much more than that is true - it is true in the spiritual. Ploughing is hard work. Ploughing means the disturbing and breaking up, of settled conditions. When things and people have settled down, have accepted a position and become fixed, they do not like being disturbed, heaved up, turned over, and broken open. Ploughing is hard work. It goes against everything that is set and settled, fixed and accepted. Ploughing is the uncovering of what is hidden, and no one likes that. The presence of a Christian has the effect of uncovering the hidden. If it does not, there is something wrong with the Christianity. Our presence and our ministry in this world is to uncover. The Lord Jesus knew what He was talking about when He lighted upon this figure, this simile, the plough and the ploughman. He knew something of what ploughing meant in the disturbing of the settled and comfortable and accepted and fixed state of things. Oh, that is hard work! He knew the loneliness of the plough. He knew what it meant - the 'come-back' when His presence uncovered the hidden, for His presence in this world, if it had one effect at all, had that. Everything was uncovered by His presence. He said *"I am come a light into the world."* (John 12:46). The plough uncovers, opens up, discloses, drags out the hidden things, and people do not like that. It is hard work, it is something that has very little inspiration from the outside.

### **Lonely Work**

It is lonely work. The plough gets deep down beneath the surface, and people love to live on the surface. They do not like their depths cut into. They do not like to be told that the Cross must go deep into their lives, right down deep into the subsoil. No, that is not the thing that we love. There is that which Paul called "the offence of the cross" (Gal. 5:11, A.V.), the Cross cutting deep down into the life and refusing to have anything superficial. We want to be like that, we want to have things in us covered over and pretty and undisturbed and unbroken into, but the plough of the Cross does all these things, and to plough with the Cross is lonely and uninspiring work. You may well return chilled to the bone with the cold blast in your ploughing work. It is like that. That is the work of the plough. Christ knew well what the plough of the Gospel, the Word of God, and the message of the Cross meant.

### **Temptation To Give up**

And then the ever-present temptation to give up. I think if there is one thing calculated to make a man want to give up and go home and get by the fire it must be plough-work - I mean in our country, at any rate. It must be an ever-present temptation to just give up and go back and, if it is not actually done, very often the heart must be on the brink of it. There is the extent of the work, the ground to be covered. You look over the acres and acres of muddy land and feel the biting wind, and the heart could go out of you. You could say, 'No, it is too much'. And in this world of the work of God, our hearts can so easily be turned back, made to look back by the consciousness of how much there is to be done. Oh, do you not often feel like that? After all, how little has been done, how much remains, what a vast field of unsaved and of spiritual need remains untouched! I think we must confess that sometimes we feel the task is impossible, it is altogether beyond us. Shall we even touch it a little bit? If we begin with our earliest breath and finish with our last, what will there be to

show for all, in view of all that there is? The temptation is ever present to say that, because of the greatness, the vastness, of the demand, it is hopeless or beyond us.

### **The Setbacks**

And then what setbacks! The constant interruptions, the element of frustration ever present. It is not just all straightforward. It is not as though you get your plough or your tractor and go ahead up and down. There are these constant interruptions, these constant goings-wrong, comings-in of the extra and the unexpected and the element of frustration. Is it not like that in the work of God? If only it was straightforward, if only it were clearcut, if only there were not all these extras, these unexpected things, all this that constitutes the element of frustration. How we crave for a straightforward way. How we just long that things could be straightforward, and it seems that it is never like that at all. You think you are just going to get on with a fine furrow. Something happens, breaks down, goes wrong somewhere, and it is like that all the day long.

### **The Weariness**

And then the weariness in the way. The Lord Jesus knew something about that. *"Jesus... being wearied with his journey, sat thus on the well" (John 4:6)*. He spoke of those who were weary, the heavy-laden (Matt. 11:28). He knew about it - that enemy inside. I think there are few greater enemies than the enemy of weariness. It is right inside. You are fighting against something inside.

Now do you think when the Lord Jesus said these words He was saying them harshly, without understanding, without sympathy, without knowledge of all this? Oh, truly not. He knew it all. He was the master ploughman, He was the chief of all the ploughmen of God. He accepted a difficult field, He took on a tremendous task; all the elements were blowing against Him from hell and the world; all the things we have mentioned were true in His case. And yet He will say to His fellow-workers, *"No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God"*. The heart must not go back. We must not contemplate giving up.

### **The Ploughman's Resources**

Yes, that is all very well, and there would not be much help in that, in just being told that, even if *He* told us, if we did not know of the ploughman's resources. The ploughman must have resources or he will never get through. What are they?

#### **(a) The Lord's Forewarning as to the Cost**

Well, first of all - and it does not seem to be, at first glance, very helpful, but the Lord thought it had a place - you see, He told His servants frankly what they were going to meet and what it was going to cost. *"Whosoever doth not bear his own cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:27)*. It is going to cost you everything, it is going to be a difficult way. If you are looking for self-gratification, this is not the way for you. If you are looking for popularity, this is not the way for you. Understand from the outset that this is how it is going to be. You will never be able to sow and reap and have the much happier side of life until you know something about ploughing. Plough life comes first. It is the basis of everything, and it is the hard grind with everything against. So that first of all it is necessary for us to be fortified with the realization of this, that we are not going to have an easy time with the Lord and in His matters. Let that be settled. If only it could be settled once and for all, it would

undercut a great deal of this heart looking back. We pull ourselves together and say, 'But is this not what we knew it would be, what the Lord told us it would be? Is this not really the way that we expected, the way of the Cross? I say that may not be a very concrete asset, and it does not always bring us a great deal of invigoration, but nevertheless it has to be settled, and the Lord felt that was necessary; that we should not get anywhere until we had counted the cost, settling it beforehand in our hearts, knowing that it would work out in this way - and it does. The Christian must always be in possession of a basic understanding that right to the end there will always be an aspect of the Christian life which is like the plough work.

### **(b) Vision and a Sense of Vocation**

But then there are the positive assets. There has to be - and without this we shall always be at a discount and loss - there has to be vision which produces a sense of vocation. How could a man go on with that plough work through the blast of Winter with all this that he is up against if he did not see ahead, if he had not got in his eye the result, the long run, if he did not look beyond the present to the future and see what it was unto? He must have vision. It is the great asset creating a sense of vocation. That is, this vision constitutes a call, a draw, a life-purpose, it brings the element of meaning into all. If you cannot see beyond this, there is no meaning in it - turning all this over for its own sake, doing all this just as an end in itself. No, he must see ahead and keep the vision ever before him or he will give up. And that vision must make him feel it is worth it, it is unto something, it is not in vain, there is purpose in it, a sense of vocation, and in the work of the Lord it must be like that. There is a purpose in the most difficult, the most heartbreaking work. There is purpose in it all. We must have that vision which has brought into us a sense of vocation. We are called with destiny, destiny is right at the centre of our being, and we are working under the grip of that sense of destiny, which is only another word for vocation.

### **(c) The Power That Worketh In Us**

But then, it is uphill work. Ploughing, though it be on the level naturally, is uphill work always. You are going against something, you have to get over something, everything is against you. It is uphill work, but what a range is in that word in Ephesians - "*raised him from the dead, and made him to sit at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all...*" (1:20,21). "*According to the power that worketh in us*" (Ephesians 3:20). I wonder if you have noticed that word in the letter to the Ephesians, how repeatedly it occurs - "according to", "according to", and here it is. "*Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us*". That is the ploughman's resource. We may not often be conscious of the exceeding greatness of that power working in us; more often we are totally unconscious of it and only conscious of our own weakness and feebleness and emptiness and foolishness. That has always been true - weak and foolish and empty and useless. How often have our hearts turned back, looked back, with this temptation to give up, to let go, to say we cannot go any further. Oh, we would be ashamed to say how many times, how true that is of our history. But we are still here, and we shall be there at last. As we are here at the end of this year, by the grace of God, because of the power that has worked in us and for no other reason at all, we shall be there at the end of all the years on the same ground - not because we were so sufficient, but because of the power that worked in us. It is hard work and hard going and lonely, and against everything conceivable, but there is the power that worketh in us. It will see the work done if we draw upon that power.