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## Threshing: The Lord's Method

*by T. Austin-Sparks*

*Transcribed from a message given in March 1959.*

That hymn always brings back to my remembrance an incident - I've often referred to the Tolley-Alexander Mission, and on one occasion while the meetings were going on at the Albert Hall, Dr. Tolley and Mr. Alexander were held up in the traffic and didn't arrive on time. Everybody was there, the place crowded, Mr. Harkness at the piano waiting, waiting anxiously. And then Mr. Harkness got up and said, "I think we'd better be singing. What shall we sing?" The words were hardly out of his mouth before the booming voice of Mr. Alexander at the far door shouted "39!" And in a trice the piano was going and it was: "There's Not a Friend Like the Lowly Jesus."

Shall we pray? [Prayer was not recorded.]

The crises of threshing floors in the Word of God; we're following on that idea this morning, taking Isaiah's parable of spiritual understanding in the twenty eighth chapter of his prophecies - twenty eighth chapter of Isaiah at verse 23: "Give ye ear and hear my voice, hearken and hear my speech. Doth the ploughman plough 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 cumin 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 cartwheel turned about upon the cumin. The fitches are beaten out with a staff and the cumin 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."

Chapter 29, verse 14: "I will proceed to do a marvelous work among the people, even a marvelous work and a wonder. And the wisdom of their wise men shall perish and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hid."

[Verse] 24: "They also that erred in spirit shall come to understanding and they that murmur shall learn doctrine."

There's one fragment from the book of the Acts, chapter 14, verse 22; 21 and 22: "When they had preached the gospel to the 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."

You see that this parable of Isaiah's is related to spiritual understanding - spiritual understanding in one particular connection; that is, as to the meaning of the ways of the Lord with His people. If you look into these chapters, you will see that this particular fragment containing this parable, has to do with the faithful company of the Lord's children who in the midst of many *unfaithful* were suffering for their faithfulness. And that is always a difficult thing to understand: suffering for faithfulness to the Lord. It's very testing of faith.

Because of this perplexity, and the presence of such suffering, the Lord gave His servant this word and this parable. The meaning in general of the parable is simply this: that men apply to nature their natural or their acquired wisdom, wisdom either born of instinct or of experience - what should be done with this and that, and when it should be done, 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 the other thing is that behind the very things that they are doing, expressing their wisdom, their knowledge by learning, by experience, by training, behind what they are doing, because it is God-given wisdom, there's a *spiritual* meaning. They do *many* things and they don't see the spiritual meaning of the things they're doing.

I've often felt, and sometimes said, that I wish that all the experts in the different realms of knowledge and science could see *through* their expert knowledge to the spiritual interpretation. What a lot we should have if all the botanists could give us the spiritual meaning of things in that realm and all the physicians could give us the spiritual meaning of things in that realm! But that is just what is being said here, that behind things that are done in nature (and in this case the agriculturalists) there are spiritual meanings and we can get at those very quickly, it will take us no time.

Beginning: "Doth the ploughman plough continually to sow?" Well, the answer of common sense is no, of course he doesn't. He would be a madman if he ploughed and then went ploughing all through the year, and did nothing else, kept ploughing or harrowing his ploughed ground. Doth he do that *continually*? No, it's a job that has got to be done - the breaking up, the turning over, the exposing to the elements, the harrowing - it's something necessary, essential, but it's not indefinite, continuous, and permanent. It's something to be done but it's something done which has its time, its place, its beginning, and its end. Well, anybody knows that much about farming. Even I do.

Well, the Lord is speaking, saying to His faithful people who are, or who are feeling as if they're under the plough and the harrow, that their experience is like that. Furrows are being cut deep into their souls. They're being turned up and turned over, laid bare, exposed, broken, harrowed. The Lord says, even to faithful people, "This is necessary". We're looking ahead to a harvest - real values. This is an essential aspect of the work. But take this comfort: that's not going on forever. Under the hand of the Lord it is periodic and it is timed. It comes into the individual life of a 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 and overcoming and breaking up.

It's the hard way toward some fresh harvest, but the word of the Lord is, "My dear people, remember this: *I am* the Man with the hand on the plough who has this whole thing in hand, and this won't go on forever. It won't go on forever. It's something necessary." Everybody will agree, everybody will agree with it in nature. We agree with it surely, in grace. It's something necessary. *But* it has its time limit, and when that phase is accomplished, the Lord stops that, and says, "Now that's done. We've got that far. We can get on with the next thing."

I must leave you to interpret and apply the parable. It may be personal, it may be local, it may be general. That's where it begins. When He has done that, then the parable goes on with the seed. And as you notice, there are four kinds of seed mentioned here.

And it is a very interesting thing, if you could detect it, which is very difficult to do in our translation, that the verbs chosen are chosen in relation definitely and specifically to the kind of seed. Fitches, or the anise of the New Testament, or the fennel of today (all the same) the smallest of them all, so minute that one grain could hardly be seen. That's one thing. The cumin - also very small, very small, but a little larger. And the verbs used in these connections, as you notice, as to the fitches, just scattered like that; scattered like that. As to the cumin, another verb is used. It is distributed more carefully - it's something more than the other: distributed. And then when you come to the barley and wheat, it is dropped into holes. It is planted. It is given this more particular care of where it is put. It's not just broadcast. It's planted.

Now probably you can see something through that - the Lord's people vary - I don't 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's all a part of the great harvest, but supposing we look at the fitches and the cumin. Now there's something of less importance, but perhaps those who are smaller, immature, shall we say: the child stage, I think they comprise by far the larger number of the Lord's people scattered abroad. They are just (they are the Lord's children, when I say "just" I don't mean to take away value at all) they are the Lord's people in general: scattered over the earth. The world is the field - scattered like that - 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.

Notice what follows: *how* the fitches and the cumin are dealt with in one way. The wheat and the barley are dealt with in quite another way. To the little fitches and cumin, no cartwheel is taken, no threshing machine is employed. It only just needs a gentle tap of the rod. So easily, 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, isn't this true of the Christian life? Sometimes you wonder *why* so many people get away so easily, so many Christians get off with it so lightly. The Lord doesn't seem to deal with them as He deals with others, perhaps you. But all right, their time hasn't come. Of course, all parables break down, you know, you can't change fitches into wheat, but here is where all parables have their limitations. Within a certain realm - 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 easygoing. It's just the staff, it's just the rod, it's just a pull-up here and there without anything very drastic. That's what is being said here: the Lord deals with people according to their measure.

### **According To Their Measure**

At a certain stage their measure is this; and the Lord deals with them accordingly. That's what he's saying here. But immediately the question of greater measure and greater value comes into view. It seems to me sometimes that comes into view very early. Sometimes it seems to take much longer. Be that as it may, 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 *bruised*. If it's a question of the value of bread, of food, then those who are going to be bread, 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, using the flail on you, hammering, that's a hopeful sign. I say it to you, I say it to you: it *is* a hopeful sign. The Lord is meaning something more of value in your life for *others*. For others! It's bread corn that is bruised.

Now, many young Christians don't understand when we speak to the Lord's more mature people about the difficulties and the sufferings of the Christian life, and they think that we're a bit morbid in making the Christian life complicated and hard. If there are such young people, young Christians here this morning, just listen. You're the Lord's. The Lord will deal with you *appropriately* to where you are spiritually. He will, He'll 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 cumin. But remember this: it may not always be like that.

The Lord Who wants the most and Who is set - Whose heart is set - upon *bread* for His people, 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's going to be like that to satisfy *that* desire of His heart, you're going to have a difficult time. You're going through the threshing floor. You're going to know the bruising, dear friend, and if the Lord is not able to do that and He has to keep us on the elementary basis, the easygoing basis, where we're 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 be saying that He's not able to do all that He would do if He could, in this great need of bread. Great need of bread. So if He really does turn His cartwheel upon us, if the hoofs of the horses stamp on us, if the flail gets to work, it's because it's bread corn, it's bread corn. It's something by which He's going to serve Himself in the interests of others.

That briefly, very briefly and imperfectly, is Isaiah's parable. Now if you look, you'll see how that worked out with this company. A suffering remnant, suffering, not because of their own unfaithfulness, but the unfaithfulness of the nation as a whole. Suffering - under the Lord's hand being dealt with, disciplined. It was that remnant, *that* remnant which was the Lord's key to the whole later situation. You know that, from your Old Testament. It's always been like that. The key to the situation for 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.

Well, now, take the parable. See what the Lord is saying, perhaps to you, you've had a harder time than many people and you don't understand. You've perhaps said, "Is this necessary to the Christian life? Look at all these other Christians! Christians, but they don't have my difficulties and troubles." Yes, well the parable explains it. See, the whole point of this parable is spiritual understanding. *Spiritual* understanding. Don't you understand? Don't you understand the Lord deals with His people in different ways? Yes, they're His people, *but* so far they cannot just serve Him in the way in which He wants to be served and so He's dealing with them, quite gently in their category, in their measure, but *you* may be chosen for something more. Something more.

You know, friends, the idea has been very common in Christianity that it's a great and wonderful thing to be mightily used of the Lord: "Ah, it's wonderful! Oh, 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! A great thing!" Let me tell you, that's an entirely false conception! The truth is, the truth is that those who serve the Lord most truly go through the deepest agonies of suffering. There's the balance kept like that. Balances are truly kept by God: extra suffering, extra usefulness; little suffering, little usefulness. That's how God keeps His balances. That is what is here inclusive in this story.

So, you may be having a more or less easy time, I don't 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're having a particularly difficult time, most likely it's because the Lord is going to meet need more fully through you.