**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**ISAIAH-028. THE HUSBANDMAN AND HIS OPERATIONS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"23.* *Give ye ear, and hear my voice; hearken, and hear my speech. 24. Doth the plowman plow all day to sow? doth he open and break the clods of his ground! 25. When lie hath made plain the face thereof, doth he not cast abroad the fitches, and scatter the cummin, and cast in the principal wheat and the appointed barley and the rie in their place? 26. For his God doth instruct him to discretion, and doth teach him. 27. For the fitches are not threshed with a 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. 28. Bread corn is bruised; because he will not ever be threshing it, nor break it with the wheel of his cart, nor bruise it with his horsemen. 29. This also cometh forth from the Lord of Hosts, which is wonderful in counsel, and excellent in working.."*

*Isaiah 28:23-29*

The prophet has been foretelling a destruction which he calls God's strange act. The Jews were incredulous, scornful men. They did not believe him; and the main reason for their incredulity was that a divine destruction of the nation was so opposite to the divine conservation of it as to amount to an impossibility. God had raised up and watched over the people. He had planted it in the mountain of His inheritance, and now was it going to be thrown down by the same hand which had built it up? Impossible.

The prophet's answer to that question is this parable of the husbandman, who has to perform a great variety of operations. He ploughs, but that is not all. He lays aside the plough when it has done its work, and takes up the seed-basket, and, in different ways, sows different seeds, scattering some broadcast, and dropping others carefully, grain by grain, into their place--dibbling it in, as we should say. But seedtime too, passes, and then he cuts down what he had so carefully sown, and pulls up what he had so sedulously planted, and, in different ways, breaks and bruises the grain. Is he inconsistent because he ploughs in winter and reaps in harvest? Does his carrying the seed-basket at one time make it impossible that he shall come with flail and threshing-oxen at another? Are not all the various operations co-operant to one end? Does not the end need them all? Is not one purpose going steadily forward through ploughing, sowing, reaping, threshing? Is not that like the work of the great Husbandman, who changes His methods and preserves His plan through them all, who has His time to sow and His time to reap, and who orders the affairs of men and kingdoms, for the one purpose that He may gather His wheat into His garner, and purge from it its chaff?

This parable sets forth a philosophy of the divine operations very beautiful and true, and none the less impressive for the simple garb in which it is clothed.

**I. All things come from one steady, divine purpose.**

We may notice in passing how reverentially the prophet believes that agriculture is taught by God. He would have said the same of cotton-spinning or coal-mining. Think how striking a figure that is, of all the world as God's farm, where He practises His husbandry to grow the crops which He desires.

What a picture the parable gives of sedulous and patient labour for a far-off result!

It insists on the thought of one steady divine purpose ever directing the movements of the divine hand.

That is the negation of the godless theory that the affairs of men are merely the work of men, or are merely the result of impersonal causes. The world is not a jungle where any or every plant springs of itself, but it is cultivated ground which has an Owner who looks after it.

It is the affirmation that God's action is regulated by a purpose which is intelligent, unchanging, all-embracing to us because revealed.

**II. That steady purpose is man's highest good.**

The end of all the farmer's care is the ripening of the seed. God's purpose is our moral, intellectual, and spiritual perfecting.

Neither His own glory nor man's happiness, which are taken by different schools of thought to be the divine aim in creation and providence, is an object worthy of Him or adequate to explain the facts of every man's experience, unless both are regarded as needing man's perfecting, for their attainment. God's glory is to make men godlike. Man's happiness cannot be secured without His holiness.

God has larger and nobler designs for us than merely to make us happy.

This is the will of God concerning you, even your sanctification.

Nothing short of that end would be worthy of God, or would explain His methods.

**III. That purpose needs great variety of processes.**

This is true about nations and about individuals.

Different stages of growth need different treatment.

The parable names three operations:--

* Ploughing, which is preparation;
* Sowing, or casting in germinating principles;
* Threshing, which is effected by tribulation, a word which means driving a tribulum or threshing-sedge over ears of grain.

So sorrow is indispensable for our perfecting.

By it earthly affections are winnowed away, and our dependence on God increased. A certain refinement of spirit results, like the pallor on the face of a chronic invalid, which has a delicate beauty unattainted by ruddy health. A capacity for sympathy, too, is often the result of one's own trials. Rightly borne, they tend to bend or break the will, and they teach how great it is to suffer and be strong.

But sorrow is not enough; joy is indispensable too. The crop is threshed in tribulation, but is grown mostly in sunshine. Calm, uneventful hours, continuous possession of blessings, have a ministry not less than afflictions have. The corn in the furrow, waving in the western wind, and with golden sunlight among its golden stems, is preparing for the loaf no less than when bound in bundles and lying on the threshing-floor, or cut and bruised by sharp teeth of dray or heavy hoofs of oxen, or blows of swinging flails.

So do not suppose that sorrow is the only instrument for perfecting character, and see that you do not miss the sanctifying and ripening effect of your joyous hours.

Again, different types of character require different modes of treatment. In the parable, the fitches are sown in one fashion, and the cummin in another the wheat and barley in still another; and similar variety marks the methods of separating the grain from the husk, one kind of crop being threshed another having a wheel turned upon it. Thus each of us gets the kind of joys and pains that will have most effect on us. God knows where is the tenderest spot, and makes no mistakes in His dealing. He sends us afflictions sorted, sorrows of all sizes.

Let us see that we trust to His loving and wise adaptation of our trials to our temperaments and needs. Let us see that we never let clouds obscure the clearness of our perception, or, failing perception, the serenity of our trust, that all things work together, and all work for our highest good--our being made like our Lord. We should less often complain of the mysteries of Providence if we had learned the meaning of Isaiah's parable.

**IV. All the processes end in garnering the grain.**

There is a barn or storehouse for the ripened and threshed crops. The farmer's toil and careful processes would be absurd and unintelligible if, after them all, the crop, so sedulously ripened and cultivated and cleansed, was left to rot where it fell. And no less certainly does the discipline of this life cry aloud for heaven and a conscious personal future life, if it is not to be all set down as grim irony or utterly absurd. There must be a heaven if we are not to be put to intellectual bewilderment.

What was needed for growth here drops away there, as blossoms fall when their work is done. Sunshine and rain are no more necessary when the fields are cleared and the barn-yard is filled. Much in our nature, in our earthly condition, in God's varying processes, will drop away. When school-time is done the rod is burned. But nothing will perish that can contribute to our perfecting.

So let us ask Him to purge us with His fan in His hand now, lest we should be found at last fruitless cumberers of the ground or chaff which is rootless, and fit only to be swept out of the threshing-floor.