

Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit.

A VISION OF THE FIELD.

A Sermon

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“For, behold, I am for you, and I will turn unto you, and ye shall be tilled and sown.”—Ezekiel xxxvi. 9.

THESE words were addressed to the mountains of Palestine. Albeit that they are now waste and barren, they are yet to be as fruitful and luxuriant as in the days of Israel's grandeur. God will turn to them, and the vines shall then crown the summits, and there shall be harvests again upon the mountain tops.

The mountains of Israel were a soil of glass, in which you could see reflected, at a single glimpse, the condition and character of the people. While the Israelites were obedient to God, the mountains dropped with new wine, and the little hills seemed to melt with fertility. Honey dropped from the rock, and oil appeared to be distilled of the very flint. When the people sinned so that God gave them over to their enemies, irrigation being neglected, and the culture of the soil no longer profitable, the mountains straightway became as blank and barren as though they were a howling wilderness. And then, again, when the people repented, and turned to God, the soil began to cover the mountains, carried up there by the industry of the people, the sides of the hills were terraced, the waste places began to blossom, and the vines were once more filled with clusters. You could thus read the history of the people in the aspect of their hills.

I intend to take the hills of Israel as a representation of our own state,—the state of our own heart. As they really did mirror forth the condition of the people of old, the metaphor becomes peculiarly attractive. I shall divide the subject thus; firstly, *man's heart, by nature, is like a waste field*; secondly, *there is no hope for that field unless God shall turn to it in mercy*; thirdly, *when he doth turn to it, he will have to till it*; for, lastly, *not until after tillage can it be sown with any hope of success.*

I. MAN'S HEART, BY NATURE, IS LIKE A WASTE FIELD.

A waste field produces no harvest. Reaper, thou shalt never fill

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thine arms with sheaves, the axle of the wain shall never creak beneath the load of harvest, and the swains shall never dance with the maidens at the harvest home. Let the field lie waste, and the fruit it will yield in a whole century will not be sufficient to feed a single individual.

Such is man, we say, by nature. He brings forth no fruit unto God. Leave him alone, and he will live unto himself. Perhaps he will be a respectable sinner, and, if so, he will selfishly spend all his life in trying to provide for himself alone, or for his family, which is but a part of himself. He will go through the world from his birth to his sepulchre without a thought of God. He will never do anything for God. His heart will never beat with love to him. He may sometimes, out of sheer selfishness, go with others to worship; but he will not worship God, whatever deference he may show to the outward form. His heart will be in complete alienation from the God who made him. He will live and he will die a strange monstrosity in the world,—a creature that has lived without love to his Creator.

Perhaps, however, he will be a disreputable sinner. He will live in sin, find his comfort in drunkenness, perhaps in lust, possibly in dishonesty; but anyhow, he will bring forth nothing that God can accept. Methinks I see the great God coming to look at the man, even as a farmer might come to look upon his fallow field. What can God see? Is there a prayer? Yes, he says a few forms of prayer; but they are dead, lifeless things, and God cannot accept them. Does he see any praise? Perhaps a shrivelled hymn growing up in the corner of the field; but since there is no heart in it, it rots and dies, and God abhors it. He looks the whole field through. There is no thought for God, no consecration of time to God, no desire to honour God, no longing to produce in the world fresh glory to God, no effort to raise up to him fresh voices that shall praise his name. He lives unto himself, or to his fellow-men; and having so lived, he so dies. Now you know that there are a great many people who say to themselves, "Well, if we do good to our neighbour, if we are kind to others, that is enough;" and they expect to have some reward for this. But, mark you, every servant expects his master to pay his wages; surely then, if you serve your fellow-men, they ought to reward you. Let them give you a statue, or let them emblazon your name on one of the rolls of fame. Let them sound down your exploits to future generations. Still, let your debtor and creditor account be fair. If you have not done anything distinctly and avowedly in the service of God, there is no remuneration that you can reasonably expect God to give you. What have you brought forth unto him? Nothing whatever; and we say it sincerely, for we know how sadly true it is, the natural heart of man never does and never can produce so much as one single grain that God can receive as being to his honour and glory. As for the natural children of men in all their generations,—

"Like brutes they live, like brutes they die;
Like grass they flourish, till thy breath
Blasts them in everlasting death."

Alas for them! Unto thee, great God, they render no prayer nor praise, no heart-felt love nor reverent adoration. They pass through this world as though there was no God.

Worse than this, *the field that has never been ploughed or sown does produce something.* There is an activity about human nature that will not let us live without doing. Unless you should shut yourselves up in a cell like a monk, or live on the top of a pillar, like Simeon Stylites, you cannot very well pass through life utterly inert, without any purpose of mind, without any movement of the limbs, without any stir of the passions; and I suppose that even Simeon Stylites did exert some influence, for he led other people to be as great fools as himself. And even monks do some mischief by losing the interest on talents for which they ought to have rendered a good account, and spending their time in laziness which they ought to have employed in useful service. "None of us liveth to himself." Is there no wheat growing on that soil? no barley? no rye? Very well, then, there will be darnel, and cockle, and twitch, and all sorts of weed. So it is with the unrenewed heart. It produces hard thoughts of God, enmity against the Most High. It is prolific of evil imaginations, wrong desires, and bitter envyings. As these ripen, they bring forth ill words,—idle, or, it may be, lascivious words, and perhaps atheistic, blasphemous words; and as these ripen, they come to actions, and the man becomes an offender in his deeds, perhaps against man, certainly against God. He lives to produce sour grapes. The apples of Gomorrah hang plentifully upon him.

I know I am describing some here present. There are many such persons to be found in all our assemblies. They have done no good in their lives. Measuring their lives by the standard of God, they have done nothing. On the other hand, they have been guilty of much evil, they have brought forth fruit unto sin. Nor is this the worst of it. The bad farmer, who lets his fields all run to weeds, does mischief to the neighbouring farm. Here comes the wind, willing to waft seed—good seed if it can find it,—into other soil. It will take the down of the flower seed, and bear it into a garden where it will be wanted; or, if it must, it will carry the seeds of the thistle; and so, when it comes sweeping by the farmer's neglected field, it does damage to all the fields in the neighbourhood.

It is so with the sinner. "One sinner destroyeth much good." Is he a father? His children grow up to be as ungodly as himself. Is he a master? Then his men, like him, break the Sabbath, and neglect the ways of God. Is he a workman? Then his fellow-workmen, who are younger than himself, take encouragement from his evil example; they are led into sin while they blindly follow in his wake. Whatever station of life you put him into, he does mischief; the more eminent he is, the more eminently mischievous he is. I do not allude now to those who are grave offenders against the laws of society. I mean those good, decent people who have no fear of God before their eyes. I do think they do very much mischief, for the devil's cause gets respectable through having them on its side. Those who persistently live in violation of divine

law, and who do not bend their necks to the yoke of Christ, may be very amiable, very moral, and very excellent. If so, in a certain sense, the more is the pity, because they get an increase of power to do evil, for others say, "If such good men as these can live without religion, and live despising it, why should not we?" Thus a bad cause, which would be hissed off the stage if there were none but rascals to side with it, still walks respectably in the light of day because of these persons who back it up. God deliver you, my dear hearers, from being like a field that does mischief unto others! Beware, thou upas tree, lest thy poisonous influence should receive the reward of hell fire! Beware, thou cumberer of the ground, standing there, and sucking nutriment out of the soil, and cursing the other trees of the vineyard, lest the sharp axe should soon cut thee to the core, and lay thee level with the ground.

A barren field resembles the heart of man in that *all the good influences that fall upon it are wasted*. Comes there sunshine; it produces no harvest on the fallow land. Here are the precious drops of dew glistening in the morning; but they cannot produce an ear of corn. And here fall the sweet smiling showers of rain, that make the new-mown fields all fragrant, but this field gets no good from it. It is even so with you who are still in a state of nature. You have the blessings of providence, but they do not make you grateful. You have even the blessings of the outward means of grace, but they excite in you no longings towards God. Surely, my dear friends, if this has been the case long with you, you must be nigh unto cursing.

Yet the waste field does produce something pleasant to the eye, something worth looking at; for have you not seen the gorgeous poppy, and the finest specimens of the ranunculus growing in the field that was never ploughed and sown? And there is the dog-rose yonder, and the foxglove, and the forget-me-not, all springing up and flourishing where there should have been furrows for wheat. And so a man may have a comely appearance, and make a fair show in the flesh, although he does not live near to God. In his character and reputation, there may be many a gaudy flower,—ay, as red and as conspicuous as the poppy. He may shine among men, and men may talk much about him. But, as the Lord liveth, if the Lord's plough has never gone over him, the bright blushing weed is but a weed still; a bane and a pest, not a boon or a balm, as the farmer knoweth right well. Let those of you who are in such a state see an apt emblem of yourselves every time you pass a piece of waste ground, and say, "That is just what we are, and what we shall be to the end of our lives, unless the grace of God shall interfere to retrieve us from endless ruin."

II. THERE IS NO HOPE FOR THIS FIELD, UNLESS GOD SHALL TURN TO IT IN MERCY.

Even so, unless the Lord shall turn to men, no good will ever come of them. The text says, "I am for you, and I will turn unto you." Man never does of himself turn unto God, and that for obvious reasons. We are sure he never can, for he is "dead *in* trespasses and sins." We are certain he never will, for by nature

he hates anything like a new birth; and if he could make himself a new creature, he would not, for Christ has expressly said, "Ye will not come unto me that ye might have life." Man is unwilling to give up sin, he loves it too well; unwilling to be made holy, for he has no taste for spiritual things. God, then, must come to man; for how can man, being naturally dead, and naturally unwilling, ever come to God? Experience tells us that he will not. When did you ever find a man, who had come to God, who would say that he came of his own natural inclination? All the saints on earth will tell you that it was almighty grace that made them willing in the day of God's power. If there be any man who ever came to God of himself, I can only say that I know I am not that man.

"Jesus sought me when a stranger,
Wandering from the fold of God."

If any unconverted person here will tell me that he can turn to God when he likes, I ask him why he does not turn now. What measure of damnation must be his due, when, according to his own confession, he has a power which he will not use! Sinner, talk not vainly of what thou canst do. Man, thou canst burn in hell, and thou canst fit thyself for the flames, but this is about all thou canst do for thyself. Thou hast destroyed thyself. For that inglorious deed, thy will was free, and thine agency free likewise. But only in God is thy help found. For this, be sure, thou hast neither might nor skill. If ever thou art saved, it must be by another power than thine own, and by another faculty than that which dwells in thy puny, wicked heart. God must do it. If you wait till your waste field ploughs itself, or brings forth a harvest, you may wait till doomsday; and if I wait until my hearers save their own souls, and turn unto God themselves, with full purpose of heart, I may wait till these hairs are grey, or till these bones are carried to the tomb; and even then they will not have saved themselves. If you have turned unto God, my dear hearers, you know that the Lord has done it, so give unto him the glory. If you have not been converted, God help you to cry unto him instantly and earnestly, "Turn us, and we shall be turned." Look unto him who is exalted on high to "give repentance and remission of sins." Seek ye unto him, and ye shall live. Oh, that ye could now see your wretched plight, that ye could feel your imminent peril, that ye could believe in the sovereign operations of God's grace! Then would I venture to prophesy that salvation had this day come to your house,—ay, to your very heart.

III. WHEN THE FIELD IS TO BE PUT UNDER CULTIVATION, IT MUST BE TILLED.

So, when God turns to any man in his mercy, there has to be an operation, a tillage, performed upon his heart. The farmer, unless he is a fool, would never think of sowing his corn upon a field that remains just as it was when it lay fallow. He ploughs it first. Although we are to scatter the seed everywhere, upon the wayside as well as upon the good ground, God never does. Common calling is addressed to every man, but effectual calling comes only to pre-

pared men, to those whom God makes "willing in the day of his power."

Now, what is the plough wanted for? Why, it is wanted, first of all, *to break up the soil, and make it crumble*. It has got hard; perhaps it is a heavy clay, and then it is all stuck together by the wet, and all baked and caked together by the sun that shines on it. Or perhaps it is a light soil. Well, this may not need much ploughing; but, still, it will cake over, as we all see even in our little gardens. After the rain has gone, the sun comes, the whole cakes over, and there will be no place for the seeds to thrust in their tender roots. The corn will not sink down into the earth unless the soil is broken up; and the more thoroughly pulverised it becomes, the more like dust you get it, the more hope there is that the seed will take good root.

In such-like manner must human hearts be broken. "A broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise." The more thoroughly pulverised the heart becomes, the better. Hence, there needs to be the sharp plough of the law driven right through the heart, to break up its crust, and split the clods; and then must come that blessed plough of the cross, which is the best plough that ever went across a field yet,—that blessed plough of the cross, which, as it goes over it, turns up the soil, even the very heart of it, and makes the sinner feel his sin, and hate it too, because of the love of God which is shed abroad by Christ Jesus the Lord. Thus you must be tilled, then, that the heart may be broken, for the seed will never get into an unbroken heart.

And the plough is also wanted *to destroy the weeds*, for they must be killed. We cannot have them growing. To spare the weeds would be to kill the wheat. The plough comes, and cuts some weeds in two; others it turns over, and throws the heavy clods on, and leaves them to lie there, and be buried; it turns the roots of others up to the sun, and the sun, by the brightness of its shining, scorches them, and they die. Some soils need cross-ploughing; they need to be ploughed this way and the other way, and then they need some one to go through the furrows afterwards, and pull up the weeds, or else they will not be all rooted out of the soil. And I am afraid that many of us, who have been ploughed, have divers weeds left in us yet. The field must not only be ploughed, but the weeds must be killed; and so it must be with you, my dear hearers. If the Lord really saves you, he must kill your drunkenness, he must kill your swearing, he must kill your whoredom, he must kill your lying, he must kill your dishonesty. These must all go; every single weed must be torn up; there is no hope for you while there is a weed living.

True, I mean not those weeds which still exist even in the regenerate; but even they must be doomed now. John Wellman, a member of the Society of Friends, tells a strange story of himself. One night, after he had been reading the Scripture, as he lay awake, he heard a voice, saying, "John Wellman is dead;" and, being a Quaker, he was greatly struck therewith, and wondered how it was that he could be dead. He asked his wife what his name was,

and she said, "John Wellman"; whereupon he perceived that he must be alive. At last, he understood it to mean that he was dead to the world; that he was henceforth no longer what he formerly had been, but a new creature in Christ Jesus; and it will be a blessed thing for you, my dear hearers, when the like thing may be said of you in the like sense, "He is dead." There is a man I used to know,—I wish I did not still know him so well. I used to meet him every day, some years ago; but we parted company. He would not go with me to Christ, so I went without him. I became a new man, and he is dead. Oh, how often I wish he were buried, for I have to drag his dead body about with me, and, as it putrefies in my nostrils, I have to cry, "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" That rascally old man bears my own name; and once he was identical with my own self. I could fain wish he were buried. In like manner, may it come to pass with you that you may die to the flesh, that henceforth you may live in the spirit unto God! And though the old man be still prone to corruption, what a blessed stroke is that which takes the life out of him, so that he can no longer rule over you, but the new man reigns supreme!

Ploughmen tell us that, when they are ploughing, if the plough jumps, the work is done badly. They must plough it all alike, from end to end, from headland to headland. If the plough jumps, it has gone over some weeds or knots, and not torn them up. I would like always so to preach that my plough may never jump. I sometimes say a hard word because I do not want my plough to jump; I want to tear up all the knots, and not leave one in the ground. If one sin be tolerated, or one malicious desire be spared, the life of God is not completely reigning in us. The Lord make a clean sweep of the weeds, and burn them all!

Well, now, mark you, *in this tilling there are different soils.* There is the light soil and the heavy soil; and so there are different sorts of constitutions. There are some men who are naturally tender and sensitive. Many, too, of our sisters are like Lydia; they soon receive the Word. There are others who are like the heavy clay soil; and you know that the farmer does not plough both soils alike, or else he would make a sad mess of it; and so, God does not deal with all men alike. Some have, as it were, first a little ploughing, and then the seed is put in, and all is done; but some have to be ploughed and cross-ploughed; and then there is the scarifier and the clod-crusher, and I know not what, which have to be rolled over them before they are good for anything; and perhaps, after all, they produce very little fruit. Different constitutions need different modes of action. Let this comfort some of you who have not been so much alarmed as others have been. Different soils must have different methods. Christ does not deal with all men precisely in the same way in his heavenly tillage.

A farmer has a large variety of implements. Go into the shed of a man who is a high farmer, and what a number of implements you may see! I mentioned some of them just now, but there are far more than I can talk about. So it is with our Heavenly Father;

he has all kinds of implements. Sometimes it is a providential trial. One man loses a child; another has to bury his father; and yonder one has had to follow his wife to the grave. Some have temporal losses; business becomes bad; perhaps they are out of work and half starving; others are stretched upon a bed of sickness, and others are brought near to the grave. These circumstances are all so many different sort of ploughs with which God ploughs the soil of our hearts.

The labourers, whom the Lord employs, are dissimilar likewise by the diversity of their gifts. Ministers are some of one sort, and some of another; even the same minister is not always engaged in the same sort of operation. There are some Sundays when I know some of you find me a terrible scarifier, for I have the terrors of the Lord in my conscience, and there is very little comfort in the solemn warnings I am constrained to utter. But if, sometimes, I come down upon you like a clod-crusher, it is needful, that, with true grace and good hope, I may at other times drill in the seed, and nourish your hearts with the very essence of the gospel. The faithful evangelist has to become all things to all men to accomplish his Master's work. But ye must be tilled, for there is no sowing the ground until it has been first stirred about.

And, you know, *the farmer has his proper time for ploughing.* Some soils will do better at one season, and some at another. There are some soils that break up best after a shower of rain, and some that do best when they are dryest. So there are some hearts—ay, and I think almost all hearts—that are best ploughed after a shower of heavenly love has fallen upon them. They are in a grateful frame of mind for mercies received, and then the story of a dying Saviour comes to them as just that which will touch the springs of their hearts. Anyhow, dear friends, I would like to pass the question round, Have you been tilled? Has your heart been tilled? Has the soil of your heart been turned up? Have the secret things of your heart been discovered and brought to light, just as the plough turns up the ants' nest? Have you been brought to know your own corruptions? Are there straight furrows right through you, so that you can cry out, "O God, thou hast broken me in pieces, be pleased to come to my help"? Then I am glad of it. You are ready to despair of yourself, but I am not ready to despair for you. You tremble, but I am encouraged. I rejoice, not that you are made sorry, but that you sorrow to repentance after a godly manner. God has broken your heart, and I know that he will bind it up. If he has ploughed you, he will sow you, as he said to the mountains of Israel, "I will turn unto you, and ye shall be tilled and sown."

IV. UNLESS GOD HAS TILLED THE HEART, IT CANNOT BE SOWN WITH ANY HOPE OF SUCCESS.

After ploughing, there comes the sowing. When the heart is ready, God sows it,—sows it with the best of wheat. The wise farmer does not sow tail corn; but, as Isaiah says, he casts in "the principal wheat." The seed which God sows is living seed. If a farmer were to sow boiled seed that has lost its vitality, what would be the good of it? But he sows living seed; and so the truth

which Jesus Christ preaches, and bids us to scatter, is living wheat, —living seed; and when that drops into the soil, God watches over it. The worm may come, and the crow may come; but none of these shall get the seed,—

“For grace insures the crop,”—

and up it shall spring,—“first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear.” It shall grow, for God has prepared the soil for it.

Now, I want to scatter a handful of the good seed of the kingdom. “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.” Trust Jesus, and you are saved. There,—I saw a handful of that seed go on the way-side; and another handful went upon some of you who are choked with thorns; but if there be a broken heart here, the seed has fallen upon good ground, for that broken heart says, “What! if I trust Christ, shall I be saved?” Yes, you will be saved in a moment,—every sin forgiven you in a moment, for Jesus Christ took your place and stead, and suffered all the punishment of your sins; and therefore God, having been just in punishing Christ instead of you, can let you go free, and yet be as just as though he had sent you to hell. If you trust Christ, the merit of his suffering and the virtue of his righteousness shall be yours now. You shall go your way rejoicing, because you have peace with God through Jesus Christ. Wilt thou believe or not, sinner? God give thee the grace to trust Christ! Trust him now. And if thou dost, then I shall know that God hath ploughed thee, that God hath prepared thee, ere he bade me drop in the seed. Let those of us who know the power of prayer drag the harrow across the field, for when the seed is once in, it wants harrowing. Thus let us preach the Word, and thus let us pray that the seed may take root, spring up, grow, and bring forth a hundredfold. So sinners shall be saved, and so God shall be glorified.

Exposition by C. H. Spurgeon.

ECCLESIASTES XI. 6—10; AND XII.

Chapter xi. Verse 6. *In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand: for thou knowest not whether shall prosper, either this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good.*

It is our business to sow the good seed of the kingdom, to sow it broadcast, to sow it at all times: “In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand.”

The result of our sowing does not rest with us, but with the great Lord of the harvest. Some of the seed may fall by the wayside, some among thorns, some upon a rock, or upon rocky ground with only a thin layer of earth; but if God has called us to be sowers, and we really sow gospel seed, some of it will fall into good ground, and bring forth fruit, thirtyfold, sixtyfold, or even a hundredfold.

7. *Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun:*

And as it is so pleasant for the natural eyes to behold the natural sun,