

## **SUNDAY MORNING NO. 150**

### **PARABLE OF THE SOWER**

Peter, you remember, has said,

*“Desire the sincere milk of the word that ye may grow thereby.”*

This we have learnt to do. Nothing short of the undiluted Bible will make us grow. Our system of daily reading enables us to get the full benefit and to realise the apostolic precept in the most effectual manner. Under this system, many, many features of the divine thought are brought under our notice that we should never notice, or noticing once, forget. Every time we read, we get something fresh—something we had not seen just in the same vivid light before; and when the “every time” is every day, we slowly get enriched in a way not possible with those who only look into the Bible occasionally.

This morning, we have a message through Ezekiel which, though not addressed directly to us, has a bearing on our position, from which we may take comfort. I refer to what we find in chapter 12 verse 22:

*“Son of man, what is that proverb that ye have in the land of Israel, saying, The days are prolonged and every vision faileth? Tell them, therefore, thus saith the Lord God, I will make this proverb to cease, and they shall no more use it as a proverb in Israel, but say unto them, the days are at hand and the effect of every vision.”*

It is worthwhile considering how the proverb thus rebuked, originated, and what was its precise meaning. That it had reference to the visions of Ezekiel, as well as to the prophets that had gone before him, is evident from verse 27:

*“Son of man, behold they of the house of Israel say, the vision that he seeth is for many days to come, and he prophesieth of the times that are far off.”*

Now the visions that Ezekiel saw (as regards the bulk of them) were visions of “lamentations, mourning, and woe.” This very chapter illustrates their leading character: e.g., verse 15, 20, —

*“I will scatter them among the nations, and disperse them in the countries . . . and the cities that are inhabited shall be laid waste, and the land shall be desolate.”*

All the prophets had prophesied like this. All of them foretold calamity for the people of the land, and they had done so for many years, without the calamity coming; and the result was that the people in general became sceptical about it. Because it had not come, they thought it would not come. Their scepticism took the form of a proverb, which got into circulation, and which here receives notice and rebuke at God’s hands.

*“The days are prolonged, and every vision faileth.”*

But the time, in Ezekiel’s days, were close at hand, and here Yahweh says to them:

*“In your days, O rebellious house, will I say the word, and will perform it.” “There shall none of my words be prolonged any more.” (verses 25, 28.)*

And so it came to pass. Nebuchadnezzar invaded the land, and emptied the cities of their inhabitants, and laid Jerusalem in ashes. As we contemplate the condition of Israel and their land for the last 1800 years, we are able to realise that the word of God, however it may appear at any time to be deferred, will at last come to pass, and the flippant unbelief of a heedless generation be put to silence in the grave.

There is a parallel to these things in our days. For a long time, the proclamation of the same sure word has rung in the ears of men, “*The coming of the Lord draweth nigh,*” and because the time has gone on without yet bringing the Lord, the subject has become a scorn with the majority of civilised mankind. The disappointment of prophetic expectations as, in fact, becomes proverbial. The fact has passed into a proverb, with the implication accompanying, that because the Lord has not yet come, he will never come, or, at least, “not in your day nor in mine,” as they say, by which they mean not for thousands of years yet, if he ever comes at all.

*“The days are prolonged and every vision faileth.”*

It is exactly the proverb they had in the land of Israel—exactly the proverb which events confuted and confounded in a terrible manner in Ezekiel’s days, and which will be confuted and confounded in a similar manner concerning the subject of Christ’s coming.

The proverb is more unreasonable in our day than in Ezekiel's. There are signs and tokens in our day which were lacking then. During the last forty years nearly, a great variety of prophetic anticipations have been realised, bringing a guarantee of the sureness of the prophetic word which did not exist in connection with the predicted overthrow of Israel. From the outbreak of a European revolution, in 1848, to the British occupation of Egypt in 1882, and the commencement of the Jewish colonisation of Palestine (on however small a scale), there has been an unbroken series of signs of the Lord's approach, and about which there can be no doubt, because all of them have been anticipated on the strength of the prophetic words. The only point of failure has been as to the place in the programme at which the Lord's appearing would occur, and this is a failure not of the prophetic word but of human estimate of probability. It seemed likely that the ending of Papal coercive power would be the time for the Lord to appear. The ending of the papal coercive power came at the expected time, but not the Lord, and because of this, the thoughtless cry "failure." Perhaps this failure was divinely permitted (i.e., the mistaken expectation allowed to be entertained) to try the faithful, and give the other class the pretext for going away. True failure there has not been; on the contrary, prophetic expectations that were truly warranted have in all particulars been realised in a very wonderful manner.

Dear brethren and sisters, the word of the Lord standeth sure. Onward the divine programme will go till the very consummation itself is reached, in the glorious event to which this ordinance of the breaking of bread has been pointing for the last eighteen centuries—the coming again of our Lord Jesus Christ in power and great glory. This event may take place any day, and the days may yet be prolonged, though the vision cannot fail. The all-important question for each of us is, in what attitude ought that event to find us so that we may find favour of the Lord in that day? On this question we have light thrown by the portion read from Luke this morning. I refer to the parable of the sower. We are all acquainted with the features of this parable uttered by the Lord. A sower scatters seed-grain in the field, which, being a Syrian field, is not ploughed all over as in western agriculture, but is merely scratched, and consequently has a very diversified character of surface—strong wayside places, thirsty places, rocky spots, and bits of good ground in right condition. The seed falls into these various sorts of ground, and produces various results accordingly. From the hard places it is picked off by the birds; in the shallow places, it grows to wither in the sun; in the thorny places, it is choked by the growth of weeds; in the good places, it grows to maturity, and gives a liberal return.

In the application, we need make no mistakes, because the Lord has plainly indicated it. In the first place, the seed is the word of God—the word or gospel of the kingdom, as he explains. It is not human tradition, or theological sensationalism. It is not dreams, vagaries, or imaginations. It is God's own word, as we have it in the writings of the apostles and prophets—*alias* the Bible. In the goodness of God, we have become the subjects of this word; we have been delivered from the nightmare world of imagination that exists around us in Christendom. The word itself has been sown in our hearts. The question is, as to the results. There were four results in the parable, and only one of them effectual. To which do we wish to belong? Let us look at them one by one.

*"Those by the wayside are they that hear: then cometh the devil and **taketh away the words out of their hearts.**"*

The people in question get the word into their hearts at the start, or it could not be taken away. Let us measure ourselves by the case. We have got the word into our hearts. Good: but that is no guarantee it will remain. The devil may take it away. Who the devil is, I will not stay to argue. We all know it is not the supernatural devil of clerical theology. We all know it is a devil that takes various shapes, but in every shape, is human nature in some attitude of antagonism to divine ways. The old man within is one shape of the devil—the natural man "*who is corrupt according to deceitful lusts.*" He may take away the word: he may whisper "It won't do: it will injure your standing: it will bar your way: it will cut you off from lively friends and pleasures; it will spoil your life." Resist these suggestions if you wish the seed to remain and bring forth fruit. Or the devil may take an outside shape. It may be a friend; it may even be a man called a brother. There are devils in the camp as there have ever been, even in the small camp of twelve. We have to try the spirits whether they are of God. The devil in this shape will tell you that you need not take it in such terrible earnest: that there may be such a thing as salvation and there may not: that if there is, it is easy to get: that you need not put yourself very much about: that you should, at all events, look after the main chance, and not be too strait-laced; "don't make a nuisance of yourselves: enjoy yourselves while you may, and let others

enjoy you; there are lots of fine people in the world, and plenty of good entertainment if you don't unfit yourself for it by righteousness over-much."

Brethren, this devil is dangerous, because he presents himself as an angel of light. It will be easy for you to say to him that his talk does not at all resemble the talk of Christ and his apostles; that the effect of his philosophy would be to take you away from Christ, and put you in the company of sinners which you desire by Christ's command to avoid; that in a word, he is pecking at the seed sown in your heart, and that you will have nothing to do with him. Of course, the devil may come to you in his own native hues—the out and out antagonist of the word of wisdom, though your friend, perhaps. He will ply you with various arguments against what will seem to him the unwisdom of staking your all upon a possible misadventure. He may even go further, and maintain that the whole affair of the gospel is an effete and mistaken thing, with which it is a mistake for any liberal-minded, educated man to have anything, to do. You will not be in much danger from this gentleman. He sets himself too directly in opposition to palpable truth. You will quickly dispose of him with a decisive—

*"Get behind me, Satan."*

The second class are they—

*"Who, when they hear, receive the word with joy, and these have no root, which for a while believe and in time of temptation fall away."*

Here is something for our attentive consideration. We may succeed in warding off the seed-picking raids of the devil, and fail for want of root to the seed retained. We have received the word with joy: how do we stand the times of temptation? This is a question of root. If we are rooted and grounded in the faith, we shall hold fast in the toughest trial. To be rooted and grounded in the faith, is to have the faith rooted and grounded in you. You say, perhaps feeling the roots are rather slim in your case, "Happy are they who have the faith strongly rooted in them." True; but what do you mean? "We mean what we say," answer you. Yes; but let us look under your meaning. You think this rooting to be an affair of natural constitution, and that, if you haven't got strong roots, you cannot help it. Now you are not altogether correct there. Christ's parables are uttered for instruction, and it would be no benefit to teach fatalism which Jesus never did. No; if the seed is not rooted, it is because you have not rooted it. Two men might each have a garden plot of equal quality, and sow it with the same seed. But suppose the one dug it up and manured his ground, and was careful to keep it in right condition while the seed was growing; and the other did not take these measures, but merely cast the seed on the unbroken ground, and left it to take care of itself. The seed would take and have root in the one case, and very slight root in the other. So it is with the seed of the word. The seed will take root if you adopt the means, which mainly consist of two things:

1. The daily study of the word with prayer, and the use of all helps in that direction, as regards meetings, companions, books &c., and—
2. The avoidance of everything that will check the growth of the seed, such as worldly pleasures, sinful companions, flesh-pleasing and foolish literature, such as novels, comic publications.

By such means the seed will take root, and in time of temptation, it will be there to withstand all assault.

The third class is an easily recognisable class, and one in which it is very easy to be included.

*"They who fell among thorns are they who when they have heard, go forth and are choked **with cares, and riches, and pleasures** of this life and bring NO FRUIT TO PERFECTION."*

Surely dear brethren and sisters, none of us wish to be included in this class, and yet how liable we are to fall into it. How much all of us know of "*cares*"—few of "*riches*"—perhaps some of "*pleasures*." These are the thorns. We must keep our eye on them. Pluck them up in every possible case. Whatever happens, we must not let the word be choked in our hearts. It is here where Christ's exhortation applies with especial force.

*"If thy right hand offend thee, cut it off; if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out."*

There are many things that people do and enjoy, to their own hurt, in this matter. The wisdom of the cutting off will be very manifest to them in the day of the Lord, if not before. It will be too late to pluck up the thorns when the day comes to inspect the garden. If the king's plants lie all sickly and stunted and dying, and the devil's thistles are flourishing in a vigorous and umbrageous development, we may be quite sure there will be no prize awarded for such horticulture. Practically, it means this: while giving ourselves to the word of God and prayer let us, having food and raiment, be content, and

decline all temporal aims and enterprises that would only mean an increase of “*cares and riches and pleasures*” which choke the word.

We may then hope to belong to the fourth class—the seed that fell on the good ground—being:

*“They, which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, kept it, and **bring forth fruit with patience.**”*

The fruit consists of those things that men do from the conviction of the truth. This fruit will come where conviction is at work, and conviction will remain and acquire increasing strength from the keeping of the word in the heart by the daily reading and meditation thereon, and a patient continuance in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. In such a state of things, there will be a fruitfulness, “*some thirty-fold, some sixty-fold, and some an hundred-fold,*” according to the nature of the good soil, in which there are differences of natural fertility. This fruitfulness is not a question of the absolute size of what a man does, but the proportion it bears to what he can do and ought to do. The Lord settles this in the case of the widow’s mite, which was small in itself, but very large in relation to the widow’s ability. With fruitfulness of this sort, the Lord has declared he will be well pleased, and will accept, and seal, and reward the same in the bestowal of the inconceivably larger stewardship of the kingdom of God.

It is clear, then, what the attitude is in which the Lord should find us, in the fast approaching day of His appearing. He should find us in the attitude of faithful servants: much interested in Him; much given to the promotion of His affairs: much addicted to the word and to prayer: much controlled by His commandments: and much abstinent from the friendships and riches and pleasures of this life, which choke the word, and make it unfruitful. If, in this attitude, there is much crucifixion of the flesh, much carrying of the cross, much denial of self, there is also much of the answer of a good conscience, much peace and joy in the Lord, and much unspeakable promise for the day that must come, when every man must stand before the judgment seat of Christ, and receive, in body, according to what he hath done—good or bad.

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