

**God, the Master Farmer**  
by Pastor Jason Van Bemmell  
Isaiah 28:23-29

- <sup>23</sup> Give ear, and hear my voice;  
give attention, and hear my speech.*
- <sup>24</sup> Does he who plows for sowing plow continually?  
Does he continually open and harrow his ground?*
- <sup>25</sup> When he has leveled its surface,  
does he not scatter dill, sow cumin,  
and put in wheat in rows  
and barley in its proper place,  
and emmer as the border?*
- <sup>26</sup> For he is rightly instructed;  
his God teaches him.*
- <sup>27</sup> Dill is not threshed with a threshing sledge,  
nor is a cart wheel rolled over cumin,  
but dill is beaten out with a stick,  
and cumin with a rod.*
- <sup>28</sup> Does one crush grain for bread?  
No, he does not thresh it forever;<sup>[1]</sup>  
when he drives his cart wheel over it  
with his horses, he does not crush it.*
- <sup>29</sup> This also comes from the LORD of hosts;  
he is wonderful in counsel  
and excellent in wisdom.*

- Isaiah 28:23-29, ESV

### **Good Farmers are Patient and Wise**

What makes for a good farmer? Of course, farming is hard work, and a good farmer has to be willing to work hard. But is hard work all it takes to be a good farmer? No, of course not. Good farmers also need to be knowledgeable,

wise, and patient. Farmers need to know what type of soil is good for growing what kinds of crops, how to properly prepare the soil for planting, how to rotate crops to take care of the soil, when to plant, how to manage weeds and other infestations, when to harvest and how best to harvest the crops.

Farmers need to know when to be patient and wait for the right weather and when to intervene with irrigation or covering crops to prevent frost damage.

Even with knowledge, wisdom, patience, and hard work, good farmers know they're dependent on the weather and conditions beyond their control. So, the best farmers will pray and then will give thanks to the Lord for the harvest when it comes. We're coming up on Thanksgiving in a couple of weeks, and it's an annual reminder – rooted in giving thanks for the harvest – that every good thing we have comes from the Lord, and that we should always be thankful.

Today's passage in Isaiah 28 is a reminder to us that God is the Master Farmer, and that He knows best how to grow and cultivate the crop He is seeking.

### **The Pain of Plowing Hard Ground, vv. 23-24**

The work of farming, especially in the ancient world, began with the hard work of plowing:

*<sup>23</sup> Give ear, and hear my voice;  
give attention, and hear my speech.*

*<sup>24</sup> Does he who plows for sowing plow continually?  
Does he continually open and harrow his ground?*

What is the purpose of plowing? It is to tear open hard ground and make it soft and level and ready for seed planting. For God the Master Farmer, He plows the hard ground of human hearts to make us ready to receive the Word. Jesus told the Parable of the Soils as perhaps His most important parable, one of the few that is included in all three synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Let's turn to the version recorded in Matthew 13, where it is the first and main parable in Matthew's key chapter on the parables –

*That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat*

*down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: "A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear." – Matthew 13:1-9, ESV*

Sometimes people call this parable the Parable of the Four Seeds, but the seed is the same throughout the parable. What changes? The soil! What makes the difference between the wasted seed devoured by birds and the fruitful seed that produces a harvest? It's the condition of the soil!

If you want seed to sprout and bring forth grain, the soil needs to be well prepared. A few weeks ago, I scattered some grass seed on a big bare patch in our back yard, but it really hasn't done well because I didn't do anything to prepare the soil.

In Jesus' parable, the seed is the Word of God. The soil is the human heart. Only God can break down the naturally hardened heart of sinful and rebellious human beings so we're ready to receive the seed of the word. And how does God break up the hard ground of the human heart? Usually, it involves pain and suffering. Both the hardened ground of the path and the rocky soil need deep and determined plowing.

Lamentations 3:31-33 says:

*For the Lord will not cast off forever,  
but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion  
according to the abundance of his steadfast love;  
for he does not afflict from his heart  
or grieve the children of men. (ESV)*

The hard work of plowing is not pleasant, but when we harden our hearts to the Word of God and it just bounces off our conscience, we need to have the hard ground broken up. We need the Word of God to take root in our souls. We need to have it do its work in our lives and not just go in one ear and out the other.

God does not afflict from His heart. No farmer just enjoys the work of plowing. Modern farmers have large, air-conditioned tractors guided by GPS, but if you want to get a feel for the hard work plowing can be, one of the best movies to watch is War Horse, Steven Spielberg's great World War 1 movie. When a field is full of rocks, plowing is tough work and takes a long time. But the plowing is never the goal of farming, and the pain of readying our hearts for the word is not what delights the Lord.

We need to see the need for plowing when the blade of suffering cuts deep: In our hearts, we have hard places and big rocks – idols and unconfessed sins, some of which are so deeply rooted in our hearts that removing them is deeply painful. As long as we can find comfort in our idols, we will resist the deep work of the Word of God to bring true transformation. God loves us too much to leave our hearts rocky and hard.

### **The Goodness of Scattering Seed Wisely, vv. 25-26**

But the plowing leads to sowing –

*<sup>25</sup> When he has leveled its surface,  
does he not scatter dill, sow cumin,  
and put in wheat in rows  
and barley in its proper place,  
and emmer as the border?*

*<sup>26</sup> For he is rightly instructed;  
his God teaches him.*

The wise farmer has different kinds of seed, and he sows each according to its kind. So, he scatters dill, but he sows cumin, and he puts wheat in neat rows and barley in its proper place.

The seed we need sown into our hearts is always the Word of God, but the Word of God is not always the same kind of message. Broadly speaking, the Word of God contains Law and Gospel – the moral standard of God and the saving grace of God. The Word brings us conviction and comfort, instruction and assurance. But the Word of God also has parts that are very easy to understand and parts that require more thought and reflection.

Here's what Paul told Timothy about the Word of God in 2 Timothy 3:14-17:

*<sup>14</sup> But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it <sup>15</sup> and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. <sup>16</sup> All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, <sup>17</sup> that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.*

Every part of the Bible is given by God for His good purposes in the lives of His people. We need to be taught the truth, to be rebuked when we're wrong, to be corrected and shown the right way to think, believe, and live, and we need to be trained for righteous living.

If you find that you only like one kind of sermon or message or Bible passage, then your heart is probably still hard and rocky in places because only one kind of seed is able to take root and grow. Emmer is planted at the border of the farmer's field because it likes poor soils, but the wheat doesn't do well there. Barley needs to go 1.5-2 inches deep into the soil, but dill does best just ¼-inch deep. So, it is easier to grow dill and emmer than barley and wheat.

We need to be aware of how we're responding to different kinds of messages from God's Word, because it's a good indication of the condition of the soil of our hearts. We need to pray that God will make our hearts receptive to all of

His word in all of its parts. Early in my Christian life, almost all I would read and really enjoy were the New Testament letters and the Gospel of John. The Old Testament seemed like a strange book to me, except for some familiar stories, which I mostly misunderstood because I missed their connection to Jesus.

We need to pray, read, study, pray, apply, read again, study some more, pray more, and over and over again if we want the full spiritual benefit that comes from all of God's Word. God is the One who really plows and prepares our hearts for the Word, but we're called to seek Him and call out to Him. God invites us in Jeremiah 33:3 – *“Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known.”* – It's all there in His Word, but it may be hidden from us because of the hardness of our hearts, our spiritual blindness.

Over time, though, God's Word does take root in our hearts and it does start to bear fruit. Even as it bears fruit, the hard work of the Lord is not done. Jesus tells us that if we're fruitful branches connected to the vine, the Father will prune us so we bear more fruit:

*“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. <sup>2</sup>Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. <sup>3</sup>Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup>Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. <sup>5</sup>I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup>If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. <sup>7</sup>If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup>By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. – John 15:1-8, ESV*

Now, this is a slightly different metaphor than the one here in Isaiah 28, but it's still in keeping with the idea that the Word in us bears fruit. Here it is Christ Himself, the incarnate Word of God, abiding in us as His words abide in us that causes the fruitfulness. But the fruitful branches need pruning if they are to bear much fruit.

This is helpful to know because suffering in the Christian life doesn't always mean that we are hard-hearted and idolatrous. Sometimes, we are following the Lord faithfully and are very tender-hearted toward His word, and we're still suffering. This is because our Father wants us to be even more fruitful.

This makes me think of the ten Boom family during World War 2. They were trusting God and faithfully serving Him by sheltering Jewish people from Nazis in their home. Corrie ten Boom was a key leader in the resistance movement in Haarlem in the Netherlands. And yet they were arrested by the Nazis, Casper ten Boom died, and Corrie and Betsy were eventually taken to Ravensbrook concentration camp in Germany where Betsy died. Why did they suffer so much? It wasn't because they were hard-hearted; it was so they could bear more fruit. Betsy and Corrie reached many women in the concentration camp, and then Corrie's ministry and best-selling book have reached millions in the decades since.

### **The Necessity of Threshing the Harvest, vv.27-28**

Where Jesus speaks of the Father pruning the fruitful branches, Isaiah speaks of threshing out the harvest –

*<sup>27</sup> Dill is not threshed with a threshing sledge,  
nor is a cart wheel rolled over cumin,  
but dill is beaten out with a stick,  
and cumin with a rod.*

*<sup>28</sup> Does one crush grain for bread?  
No, he does not thresh it forever;  
when he drives his cart wheel over it  
with his horses, he does not crush it.*

Just as plowing is painful but purposeful and limited, so it is with the threshing out of the harvested grain. With cumin, you're trying to get the seeds out, and so you don't crush it under a threshing sled, but you beat it lightly with a flail. But wheat and barley need to be crushed if you're going to make bread out of them. Even then, you don't just keep on threshing and crushing forever.

A wise farmer knows how long to beat, sift, and crush the grains so they can reach their full potential. How does this apply to our spiritual lives? Have you ever heard that our miseries become our ministries.

Here's what Paul writes about his own miseries and ministry in 2 Corinthians 1:3-11:

*<sup>3</sup>Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, <sup>4</sup>who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. <sup>5</sup>For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. <sup>6</sup>If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. <sup>7</sup>Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.*

*<sup>8</sup>For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. <sup>9</sup>Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. <sup>10</sup>He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. <sup>11</sup>You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.*



Did the Apostle Paul need to be utterly burdened beyond his own strength so that he despaired of life itself because he was hard-hearted and idolatrous? No. He suffered so that He would learn to seek comfort and strength from the Lord. And, what's more, once he had learned to seek and find comfort and strength from the Lord in his afflictions and trials, he was then able to minister to others. He was able to comfort and encourage others with the comfort he himself received in his trial.

Paul also knew he was going to continue to face trials, and that he would continue to be delivered by God. But he ends this section by telling the Corinthians: "*You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.*" Paul is inviting the Corinthians to join in his ministry of suffering, deliverance, and comfort through their prayers.

So, Paul's suffering not only deepened his dependence on God but also gave him comfort that he could then share with others and gave him and opportunity to invite the Corinthians to be a vital part of this ministry by prayer.

### **God is Wonderfully Wise**

The more we understand these things, the more of God's wisdom we see, as this section ends:

*This also comes from the LORD of hosts;  
he is wonderful in counsel  
and excellent in wisdom.*

God knows what we need better than we do. He understands our hearts better than we do. He loves us, and He is wise and patient in the work He is doing in each of our hearts and in our church community together. We can trust Him and follow Him through whatever suffering He knows we need.

