

THE PLOWMAN SHALL OVERTAKE THE REAPER

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A Parable for our times



“Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him that soweth seed; and the mountains shall drop sweet wine, and all the hills shall melt. And I will bring again the captivity of my people Israel.” (Amos 9:13-14).

Amos was a countryman and a gatherer of wild figs (Amos 7:14). He was also a prophet, a man deeply devoted to God and looking in faith and hope for the coming of God’s Kingdom on earth. It is not surprising therefore that his visions of that kingdom were framed, not in military settings as was the case with Daniel, or priestly, temple settings as with Ezekiel, but in the rural settings of agriculture and husbandry. Because of this the Holy Spirit has given us, through him, an intimate little parable—for parable it is—of one aspect of the Time of the End which is of special interest to us to-day. It illustrates, in symbolic language, a truth that we must take to heart if we would be intelligent servants knowing what our Lord doeth.

The general background of the picture is one of unprecedented prosperity in material things. The harvest has been so plenteous that it has had to be prolonged into ploughing time, and since in Israel the harvest normally commenced in May and was over by June, whilst ploughing did not commence until October, this must have been a wonderful harvest. The vintage of grapes, which is normally gathered in August and ended by September, has been so heavy that the treading of the winepress, converting the rich yield into new wine, is still going on when sowing time commences in November. There is even greater prosperity to come, for in consequence of all this, the mountain slopes upon which the vines are grown, will “drip” (*Heb.*) sweet (new) wine; the exuberance of vines resulting from that sowing and the consequent heavy yield of grapes making it as though the mountains were literally “dripping” with wine; whilst the hills (the lower rounded eminences of the “*shephelah*” or plain of Judea) will melt (flow down—*Heb.*), an allusion to the rippling effect of the wind as it passes over vast fields of standing corn, making it appear from a distance as though it were flowing down the slopes in successive waves. Amos saw a land rich in vines and corn and growing richer, and with the Psalmist he could well say

“The little hills rejoice on every side. The pastures are clothed with flocks; the valleys also are covered over with corn; they shout for joy, they also sing.” (Psa. 65:12-13). And to crown this sunlit vision of the future the Lord stamps it as a revelation of the End Time by telling his prophet *“And I will bring again the captivity of my people of Israel, and they shall build the waste cities, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards and drink the wine thereof ...”* (Amos. 9:14).

Having thus noted that the real application of the picture is to the coming of the Kingdom, and believing that coming to be an imminent event, we naturally feel a close interest in the details of this parable. First of all, notice that there are two harvests and two vintages included in the picture—this fact is not always readily realised. The first harvest is plenteous but it is brought to an end by the ploughman, breaking up the ground for the work of a new year; and the result of that new year’s work is another harvest so plentiful that the very hills, covered to their tops with corn, seem to be literally melting with their golden load as the wind passes over it. The first vintage is plenteous, too, so plenteous that the labours involved encroach upon the work of sowing for the next year; but evidently the sowing accomplishes its work, and in that next year even this plenteous vintage is excelled by the masses of vines, terrace upon terrace, covering the mountains as far as eye can see, so laden

with purple grapes that to the poetic mind, foreseeing in anticipation the day of gathering. it is as though the mountains “drip with new wine”. In our understanding of this Scripture therefore we must find room for two harvests and two vintages. It is also closely associated with faithfulness to the Lord and zeal for his service on the part of a people consecrated to his service. This is indicated by the evident connection between the words of Amos and the promise of God given to Israel recorded in Lev. 26:3-5: *“If ye walk in my statutes, and keep my commandments, and do them, then I will give you rain in due season, and the land shall yield her increase, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. And your threshing shall reach unto the vintage, and the vintage shall reach unto sowing time; and ye shall eat your bread to the full, and dwell in your land safely.”*

A point that needs to be considered is the connection of this passage with the preceding few verses, which are quoted in Acts 15. *“After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David which is fallen down, and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up; that the residue of men might call upon the Lord, and all the Gentiles upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things.”* (Acts 15:16-17). The whole prophecy has to do with the active work that is going on in the end of this Age to bring in the everlasting Kingdom of God.

The realisation that there are two harvests indicated in the text yields the interpretation. Obviously these two harvests are the fruits of the works of the great Ages in the Divine Plan, the Gospel Age and the Millennial Age. Leaving chronological considerations out of the question, it is clear that there has been for a hundred and fifty years now a great Christian activity centred around expectation of the Lord’s return to set up his Kingdom, and that during that time there has been a great rise of Bible Societies, organisations of students, mighty revivals, and every form of Christian witness and activity. In a very real sense it could be said that the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have witnessed a reaping of seed that was sown during the earlier part of the Gospel Age.

But this has been a spiritual work, a service designed to reach the spiritually minded and show to them more plainly than before the “High Calling of Christ Jesus” which is the great preoccupation and purpose of this Age. Whatever may be one’s personal convictions regarding the Gospel Age “Harvest” in a dispensational and theological sense, it can hardly be denied that in its practical outworking it has proved to be a movement of Christian people of all denominations into a condition of closer personal relationship to their Lord and an enhanced appreciation of their High Calling. That is a rather important point. The next Age is an age of world conversion in which the ambassadors of Christ will reap abundant results from their labours; the present age, in its partial failure to convert the world, has shown that its primary purpose is the winning for Christ and the preparation for future missionary service a smaller body of dedicated believers, “a people for God’s Name”. During this “reaping”, therefore, our Lord has been primarily concerned with the members of his Church more so than with the world at large.

But as the Age passes on to its end a new feature develops. The end of the Church’s career in earth is at hand, the glorification of the last members imminent, yet it cannot be that God leaves himself without a witness on earth. He has never done so in all recorded history. Clearly there must be some who have gained an understanding of the Divine Plan and whose hopes and aims are directed, not towards the heavenly, but towards the earthly phase of the Kingdom. As the spiritually minded ones “decrease” so must these earthly heralds of the new Day “increase”. Their work is not that of reaping the harvest of this Age; rather that of preparing the ground for the next. As the reaping tails off to its end so the breaking up of

fallow ground for Millennial work will begin to come into operation. Here is where the “ploughshare of trouble”, as we have called it, will do its work; for the breaking up of the “field” preparatory to the work of the new Age is not only to be done by preaching and witnessing, it is also to be done by trouble upon the nations and the failure of all men’s schemes for reform and reconstruction. In fact, it may be more correct to think of the ploughman as picturing the trouble that is upon the nations, and the sowing of seed as the Kingdom message which will be proclaimed consistently until the world passes into Armageddon. There is no doubt that in the near future men’s hearts are going to be ploughed as never before.

The ploughing, then, goes on for some little while after the reaping has ceased. This “harvest” of the Age evidently had its commencement over a century ago, and progressed until it became a mighty work. The ploughman of trouble first became evident toward the closing years of last century, and by now is rapidly overtaking (“coming near” is the literal Hebrew meaning) the reaper so that the reaping work is being steadily reduced and diminished by the pressure of the general trouble on the nations. Is not this true to the facts? Every tendency of the day is to the suppression of interest in spiritual things. The widest field of endeavour yet remaining to those who seek to gather spiritually minded ones to closer relationship with the Lord lies, not with the mass of men generally, as was the case say a century ago, but in Christian systems where may be found those who yearn for heavenly things. Such are the last grains of wheat in this, the final hour of the harvest.

The ploughman has not quite overtaken the reaper; but he is coming very close. Perhaps the full development of that fast approaching world system which is to force all except the faithful “Watchers” into a material, scientific, anti-Christian mould of thought and action (see Rev. 13:14-17) will mark the completion of the overtaking. There the reaping will end; the work of the Christian Church in this Age be finished, and the glorification of the last members not long delayed.

But there will still be those who are “scattering the seed”, continuing the message of the coming earthly Kingdom. Even though the Church be gone, God will still have his witnesses in the earth. and the signs of the approaching catastrophe may be by then so evident that there may be not a few who will stop and listen to the message of the Millennial reign. But the treader of grapes will by then also be coming very near; with the completion of the gathering of the harvest of the earth it will be the turn of the vintage (Rev. 14:18) and the One who treads the winepress of the wrath of God (Rev. 19:15) will be coming forth to that dread work. “*Who is this that cometh from Edom, with dyed garments from Bozrah?*” cries the prophet (Isa. 63). The answer leaves no doubt as to the identity of the One who will both bring to the dust the evil systems of the earth and set up his own glorious Kingdom in their place. The time of Armageddon, of “Jacob’s Trouble”, of the last uprising of evil against the incoming forces of the Kingdom of righteousness, will have come, and the vintage will for a time press against the sowers of seed and bring their work to a temporary standstill. There will be one sharp time of trouble in which it will seem as if all the powers of righteousness have been silenced and crushed to the earth; but it is at that moment that God arises from his place to intervene in earth’s affairs, and from the moment of that intervention that we are to date the Kingdom established in power.

It is from this point of time that the mountains will commence to “drop” new (sweet) wine, the true and health-giving teachings of the Kingdom. “*Out of Zion shall go forth the Law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.*” (Isa. 2:3). The old doctrines which have been characteristic of the “vine of the earth” will have been done away; Satan will be bound and

no longer able to influence mankind for evil; the great institutions of man which have oppressed and enslaved so many will have been utterly destroyed, and every vestige of man's former rule have passed away. This will be the "mountain" in which the Lord will "*make unto all people a feast of fat things, a feast of wine on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wines on the lees well refined*" (Isa. 25:6). The wine of that Kingdom will be abundant and free. "*Ho, everyone that thirsteth, come ye to the waters; and he that no money; come ye, buy and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.*" (Isa. 55:1). That is the "sweet wine" which the "mountains" will "drop down" in that day.

It is later in the Age that "all the hills shall melt". The growth of the Millennial corn-harvest will require all the Age for its accomplishment. Then, as now, it must be "*first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear. But when the fruit is brought forth, immediately he putteth in the sickle, because the harvest is come.*" (Mark 4:28-29). All through the Age the Divine missionaries will be at work, teaching, instructing, encouraging, persuading men to turn from sin to serve the living God. They will see the immature wheat growing to full stature and turning from green into gold; one day there will be a sweeping of the Holy Spirit over the earthly wheatfield and all the erect stems will rustle and stir in response to the Divine influence that is passing over them, and it will be as though great waves are passing over the serried ranks of stalks, and one might say "see, the very hills are flowing down into the plain". But it will not be the melting that means destruction; it will be the melting that indicates a final and complete surrender of all human hearts to God, the response of the creature to the Creator, the visible effect of the work of the Divine Spirit in the earth. So will the last shadow of evil flee away, the last rebel against the authority of God reap the inevitable consequence. and the sons of men enter into the glorious sunlight of the Divine presence: "*for in this place will I give peace, saith the Lord.*"