

THE SLOWNESS OF GOD

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The Slowness of God.

BY THE REV. P. T. FORSYTH, M.A., D.D., CAMBRIDGE.

'The barley in the appointed place.'—Isa. xxviii. 23–26.

ISAIAH was first a speaker then a writer. His books were addresses printed. And these addresses were short, 'occasional,' practical. They were themselves deeds, contributed to the public and social action of his day. Each of these brief and close packed messages to his age was a living act. He was neither a committee-man, an organiser, an agitator, nor a parliamentarian. He had little to show that would have been called work by people who think speech to be waste. He did not preach a gospel of work in the interest of a gospel of silence. Our own prophet of the gospel of work and silence was the most voluble of men, both by tongue and pen. Isaiah's words were themselves deeds, like every word which proceedeth from the mouth of God.

Probably Isaiah prepared his messages. They are too elaborate, concise, and compact with passionate thought to be extempore. Therefore having delivered them he took care of them. Then he published them, first, perhaps, as broad-sheets, as ballads used to circulate. Then he collected them, arranged them in some connexion, and made pamphlets of them. Then the pamphlets were collected into those thirty-nine chapters which form the book we now have in our hands. May I take it for granted that you know that the second half of our Isaiah, from chap. 40 onwards, is parted from the first by more than a century! It came from the bosom of the Captivity in Babylon, and from the genius of some inspired servant of God, whose name and personality are quite unknown to us. Whereas the only Isaiah we know lived in the time of Ahaz and Hezekiah.

This 28th chapter alone is made up of three addresses given to different people at different times. The first part, vv. 1–13, is a vehement denunciation to the sneering drunkards who were ruining Samaria. It was therefore before the destruction of Samaria in 722 B.C. The second part, vv. 14–22, is a like denunciation of the rascality of the ruling class in Judea, the ring of Pachas, as we might say, who surrounded the palace at Jerusalem, and who hoped to bribe calamity when it came, and avert by diplomatic chicanery what

could be avoided only by righteousness. And the last part, vv. 23–29, is a kind of parable of judgments, couched, like the true parable always, not only in the speech but in the habits of the life that his audience knew best. It is quite a separate address, though it is likely enough that Isaiah himself in publication added it to the other two. In these he had denounced judgment, in this he insists that if judgment is delayed it is never forgotten. The bolt which seems to come so suddenly from heaven comes really from the heart of a storm which gathers long, works round the horizon, draws off and returns, and bursts now here now there with varying force. That, however, is not Isaiah's image. He does not go to the heavens but to the earth. He speaks to the farmer of his ways with the soil. Such, he says, are the ways of God with the people.

It was a quiet time. Hezekiah was on the throne. It might be about 710 B.C. There was little stirring in foreign politics. No great enemy was on the horizon. The Assyrian wolf had for the time retired from the fold. He was occupied with some troubles in his own lair. Hezekiah had not yet revolted from Sennacherib as in 705 he did. It was a time of vassalage, and its peace was a vassal peace. It was not a very noble one. The soul of the people was feeble. Its vices grew on it. It had no high ardour, no fiery faith, no spiritual vision. It took things as they came, and forgot them as they went. With this ease and levity of life came scepticism as usual. But it was not of the theological but of the moral sort. It did not turn on science or philosophy, which had little entrance to the Jerusalem of those days. It was the deadlier moral sort, scepticism not of God's existence but of God's righteousness. They would not deny that God was, but they thought He was careless or irrelevant: or He was venal and could be bought over when the crisis came. If God is irrelevant His word is impertinent. It is a frequent enough habit of mind at certain stages of history. It speaks thus to this very day. 'We see no trace of Him. He gives no sign. Judgment is an old-fashioned idea. We are out-grow-

ing calamity. We are learning to protect ourselves from disaster, and we fail to feel the presence or need of another protector. We prosper. We grow enlightened. Law rules all, and we learn law and control all. Science banishes pestilence. Diplomacy and the growth of humane feelings avert war. Wealth and shipping prevent famine. Free institutions prevent revolution. Calamity, even if it comes, is not to be viewed as judgment. Judgment is an outworn superstition. Let us eat, drink, and be merry—all in measure, all in comfort. Let us fleet the time carelessly, as they did in the golden worlds. Why place the righteousness of God as a spectre at our feast. If He wish to be recognized, why does He not speak infallibly? Why does He not act urgently? Let us see His judgments, and we will believe in them. "Let Him make speed, let Him hasten His work that we may see it. Let the counsel of the Holy One draw nigh that we may know it." The oracles are dumb. The miracles are sealed. Apostles are dead; and prophets are vain. "Where is His promise of His coming? For since the fathers are fallen asleep, all things continue as they were." And even if they change, we perceive neither the finger nor the scheme of God, neither His presence nor His policy, neither His power nor His justice, neither His help, His judgments, nor His kingdom.'

We speak like that in our prosperous to-day. The men of science, for instance, discard a God who does not speak or act according to the canons and methods they are used to. If He do not behave as they prescribe, He is for them practically not there. If He cannot approve Himself by the established philosophic proofs, He need not be regarded. As if faith were not in default of proofs, and the spirit in man had no power to meet God's Spirit in human affairs, and discern His presence. So we speak to-day. They spoke like it in the prophet's old yesterday. Samaria had been swept away, indeed, as the prophet saw and said it would. But that was a dozen years ago. 'We are as bad as Samaria are we? You lie, prophet. For if we were the judgment would have swept over us too. But we stand. We are at rest. We are more comfortable than when we were zealous for Jehovah. Let Jehovah bring on His judgments that we may believe. Let Him speak as we dictate, if He would have us believe. Meantime we are not sure that He is not held in

check by Baal, or has not other things to do than judge us. We will treat Baal with some respect, as we do not know when we may need him for a friend. He serves us fairly for the present. For the rest we have treaties, arrangements with foreign powers. We learn to understand high policy. We keep our eye on foreign affairs, and domestic matters, like righteousness, do not seem alarming.' So they said, and so they might have said for another hundred years and more. For it was more than another century before Jerusalem followed Samaria to the dust and her people to Exile.

Isaiah is called on for a theodicy. He has to vindicate the ways of God to men. He has to take up the prophets' and apostles' task in every age, and force home the conviction that the absence of God is not the sleep of God, nor His hiding of Himself His absence, nor His silence His unrighteousness, nor His slowness His feebleness. The slowness of God is the patience of God. His silence is His omnipotence. His hiding is the subtlety of His omnipresence. His absence is a form of His vigilance. His forbearance is a stage of His judgment and a phase of His wise justice. If the thunder of judgment do not follow fast on the flash of sin, it is not because the Judge is not at the door. At least He is in the town, and is making His way to the inquest in your house. God's procedure is a great procedure. It is perfectly infallible in its working, and sure in its event. But it will not be hurried for outcry or for defiance. He is not a passionate God, like His accusers and sceptics. There is everything to be considered, and everybody, and the righteousness not of the moment but of the long last. With Him a thousand years are as one day, and one day as a thousand years. There is method in His procedure. There is plan, patience, completeness. He stays to gather up everything, to take everything with Him, to bring everything home. The home of everything is its place in the justice of God, its function in His judgment.

This is what Isaiah had to bring home to his public, as we have to ours. We have our resources; he had his. And ours are vaster, more complete, than his, though we do not use them as he did. We have God's own theodicy in Christ, in the justice and judgment of the Cross. But Isaiah had his prophet's vision, his insight into Providence, his sound judgment of God's judg-

ment, his inspiration for judging of the Judge (which is God's Spirit reading Himself aloud). Isaiah had his sense of reality—of the reality of common life, and the reality of the spiritual principles beneath it. He had his gift of speech, of vivid observation, of fiery, fearless passion, of packed phrase. He had the skill of homely, deep parable that settles never to be dislodged, and teems from its place with God's truth pervading men's ways. And Isaiah put his theodicy in the shape of a parable from the commonest pursuits of rural life. It was there that he found the principles to God's dealings, not by excogitation, not innate in the soul, but saturating the healthy occupations of men, and ruling their practical relations with the good brown earth. He did not only illustrate his truth from their familiar toil, but he found *the same principles* in their work and in God's with the world. Just as in our fatherhood we have the rudiments of God's.

Listen, he says, you who think God sleeps because His chastisement is not incessant. Is the ploughman *always* ploughing? Is there no rest for the soil? Is there no sowing after the ploughing? Does he not let the earth alone after the sowing too? Does he fold his hands when he has torn up the ground and levelled its clods? No, he proceeds, only he changes his procedure. He puts in his seed. And he puts in different seeds different ways. He not only goes on; he discriminates as he goes on. He scatters the fitches, and the cummin; the wheat and the barley he sets with more care in rows; and the spelt he puts in for a border to these. How comes he to do this? God hath taught him, says the prophet. We should say now he has learnt by long experience. Both are right. If we do learn from experience, it is God's laws that we learn, and we learn by God's schooling. If the experience of generations has taught us, it is none the less God's teaching. Creation by evolution is as compatible with a Creator as creation by a stroke. God taught him this, says the prophet. And God taught him so, because it is God's own way. God's theodicy is rooted in the very soil. His righteousness springs from the earth. God's way with the earth is His way with its dwellers. It is just so that God tills man and farms history. Providence is the Great Husbandman. We are God's planting and God's estate. As you do not forever plough down the soil and break up the

ground, so neither does God. There is in His procedure both method and discrimination. His judgment is not a monotony of chastisement. It is not His way to mow down Samaria and Jerusalem at one sweep. He does not treat the scoundrelism of Judah in just the same way as the drunkenness of Ephraim. Drunkenness does bring a swifter judgment on a people (as on a man) than rascality, though not a surer. But as after the ploughing comes sowing, and after sowing a time of rest ere the sprout appear, so God rests and lets men rest. This is His mercy, His wisdom. He will give the one judgment time to have its effect on men before the next comes. There is method and patience in His ways as in yours which He taught you. There is method, but no monotony. There is discrimination. He is not moved by passion, else he would sweep clean the whole wicked earth. He adjusts judgment to time, place, people, and the great end in view—the great harvest at the close of all. What indeed is judgment but adjustment? God does not move like a man in a hurry, by short cuts. He does not go to His end with blunt directness like your common plain-dealer, who sees but one small near thing to do, and straightway does it and is done. With God each judgment contributes to the next, and the next may be less severe or more, according as the interval is used. The Almighty is the Almighty strategist. He moves in great orbits and roundabout ways. But His forces are always on the spot at the right time. The hour comes and the God. And He sweeps the country clean as He advances. He leaves no foe to harass his rear. His judgments are slow, circuitous, lingering, it may be, but they are patient, merciful, final in their nature. They serve a purpose, they follow a plan, they discriminate, they strike here, they lift there, here they pull men up, there they let them go. Some they only shake, some they tread, some they crush and grind to powder.

That is how the prophet goes on with his parable. He has been speaking of the soil and its treatment. He goes on to draw the like lesson from the produce of the soil and *its* treatment. Your farmer is as skilful and discriminating with the one as with the other, with the grain as with the soil. That is his art and craft and mystery. Is there no art, craft, and mystery in the great Harvester of the world? Is there no judiciousness

in His judgment? Is it but a monotone of vengeance? Your threshing now, says the prophet, is it all done one way? Do you treat all seed alike? You thresh with a stick for a beater, or with a heavy sledge with teeth, or with a heavy wheel behind a horse. The succulent produce like fitches you beat with a rod. It is enough. The heavy implement would make them a pulp. The harder stalks and grains you thresh with the sledge or with the wheel. And even in your threshing of them there is measure and skill in your conduct. You know when to stop before you crush the grain to dust. Bread-corn has to be ground. That is another and a later process. You do not thresh, thresh it till it is as good as ground up in the litter of the barn floor. You will not be for ever threshing it. Your implements are heavy and their work severe, still they are only for separating the grain from the stalk, not for grinding it. There is care, method, judgment in your proceedings. There is a differential treatment, there is a time to stop. Who taught you all this? This also is from the Lord of Hosts, so wonderful in counsel, so excellent in working. It is His own method. What in you is rural skill in Him is historic strategy. What in you is art in Him is providence. But it is the same spirit in both. Your small prudence has the same root as His vast providence. Providence is but a longer prudence. Judgment is sure, however judicious. God gives long rests but never lets go. His lessons are severe but He allows much time to ponder them. He judges one to save another. He speaks to Judah by Ephraim, and gives the lesson time to sink in. So He has spoken to the world by Israel. Beware how you turn His forbearance to your deeper damnation and His goodness into a deeper severity. He does not cease to besiege you though He draws his forces for a time out of sight.

Judah was getting over the fright of twelve years ago in the fall of Samaria. And that is always a dangerous time. People then are angry with themselves for being frightened and with the prophet who scared them. They tend to be defiant, more reckless in sin, more ready for temptation, more sceptical, more contemptuous of the slumbering power. You have seen the growing boldness of a boy in teasing a dog which he has found to be chained, till the animal with a bound tears the chain from the staple and has him in his teeth. You have heard how the glutton and

drunkard will presume on a magnificent constitution, and break nature's laws daily, till he snap and collapse with a crash. You have read how a savage race will calculate upon the patience and reluctance of a European power in its raids, insults, and cruelties, till civilization is roused and they are swept from the spot by a stroke. So it was in a way with Judah. The effect of Samaria's doom was wearing off, and the prophet would fain save them from the like. He enters into their frame of mind and reasons with it in this parable. He can remonstrate and plead as well as denounce. And he does it here.

Now, is this passage so hopelessly obscure? Is it not full of profound and luminous truth. Is the Bible not worth studying—and most worth, perhaps, just where it seems most dark. Every tangle means more of the gold thread.

Let us discriminate too. The prophet was dealing with a nation. He was amid public affairs, public sins. *There* there is both more scope and need for the preaching of judgments. With individuals there is another and a mightier word; and we live in another and more gracious time. God is the Judge and King of *nations*; but He is in Christ the Lover of *souls*. We do not do well to appeal to nations chiefly in the name of the love which so stirs and melts the soul. And we do not do well to preach incessant judgment to the souls which are the objects of the love of God. Preach righteousness and judgment to peoples, with love for the soul.

To souls preach love and faith, with righteousness for its public garb and judgment to brace the air. The judgment for sin upon the soul Christ has taken for us, if we will but take Him. The judgment of national sin may reach a point when there is no more repentance but God's unforgiveness and destruction.

Finally, for your private conduct take a suggestion from v.²⁸. You are not called on to grind the corn that you have to thresh. Beware of incessant judgment! Beware of acquiring the habit of incessant criticism! Beware lest you come to be known as nothing if not critical, like the villain Iago. You must judge, you must condemn at times. It is your duty to express condemnation, censure. Do not let this censorious habit master you. It loses the dignity of judgment and becomes mere grumbling and mere nagging.

And when the censure is over let it rest. Do

not cast things up. No generous mind does that. Especially do not do it with children. It exasperates them in one way and crushes them in another. Fathers provoke not your children to anger lest they be discouraged, *i.e.* dumpish, sullen, resentful, through being always dropped upon. Do not always be plowing, raking up the old soil

and the old sores. Let the past be. Let there be some rest for the moral ground. Sow your seed, but let it germinate in peace. Use the past, but do not be always thinking of it. Dwell with hope and faith on the future. Your Judge is your Redeemer. Never judge but in the spirit that redeems.