

SPIRITUAL GLEANING

“Let her glean even among the sheaves, and reproach her not.”

Ruth 2:15

OUR country cousins have been engaged recently in harvest occupations and most of them understand what is meant by gleaning. Perhaps they are not, all of them, so wise as to understand the heavenly art of spiritual gleaning. That is the subject which I have chosen for our meditation on this occasion—my attention having been called to it while I have been riding along through the country and, as I like to improve the seasons of the year as they come and go, I shall give you a few homely remarks with regard to spiritual gleaning. In the first place, we shall observe that there is a great Husbandman. It was Boaz in this case. It is our Heavenly Father who is the Husbandman in the other case. Secondly, we shall notice

a humble gleaner. It was Ruth in this instance. It is every Believer who is represented by her—at least we shall so consider the subject. And, in the third place, here is a very gracious permission given—“Let her glean even among the sheaves, and reproach her not.”

1. In the first place, then, we will consider something concerning THE GREAT HUSBANDMAN—GOD.

The God of the whole earth is a great Husbandman. In fact, all farming operations are really dependent on Him. Man may plow the soil and he may sow the seed, but God alone gives the increase. It is He that sends the clouds and the sunshine, it is He that directs the winds and the rain and so, by various processes of Nature, He brings forth the food for man. All the farming, however, which God does, He does for the benefit of others and never for Himself. He has no need of any of those things which are so necessary for us. Remember how He spoke to Israel of old?—“I will take no bullock out of your house, no he goats out of your folds. For every beast of the forest is Mine and the cattle upon a thousand hills. I know all the fowls of the mountains: and the wild beasts of the field are Mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell you: for the world is Mine, and the fullness thereof.” All things are God’s and all He does in Creation, all the works of His Providence, are not done for Himself, but for His creatures, out of the benevolence of His loving heart.

And in spiritual matters, also, God is a great Husbandman. And there, too, all His works are done for His people, that they may be fed and satisfied, as with marrow and fatness. Permit me, then, to refer you to the great Gospel fields which our Heavenly Father farms for the good of His children. There is a great variety of them, but they are all on good soil, for the words of Moses are true of the spiritual Israel—“The fountain of Jacob shall be upon a land of corn and wine; also his heavens shall drop down dew.” God, as the great spiritual Husbandman, has many fields, and they are all fertile, and there is always an abundant harvest to be reaped in them.

One field is called Doctrine field. Oh, what large sheaves of blessed corn are to be found there! He who does but glean in it will find very much spiritual nutriment. There is the great sheaf of Election, full, indeed, of heavy ears of corn like Pharaoh saw in his first dream, “fat and good.” There is the great sheaf of Preservation, wherein it is promised to us that the work that God has begun He will assuredly complete. And if we have not faith enough to partake of either of these sheaves, there is the most blessed sheaf of all—yes, it is many sheaves in one—the sheaf of Redemption by the blood of Christ. Many a poor soul who could not feed on electing love, has found satisfaction in the blood of Jesus. He could sit down and rejoice that Redemption is finished and that for every penitent soul there is provided a great Atonement whereby He is reconciled to God.

I cannot stop to tell you of all the sheaves in the Doctrine field. Some say there are only five. I believe the five great Doctrines of Calvinism are, in some degree, a summary of the rest—they are

distinctive points wherein we differ from those who “have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.” But there are many more Doctrines beside these five—and all are, alike, precious and all are, alike, valuable to the true Believer’s soul—for he can feed upon them to his heart’s content.

I wonder why it is that some of our ministers are so particular about locking the gates of this Doctrine field? They do not like God’s people to get in. I believe it is because they are afraid Jeshurun would wax fat and kick if he had too much food. At least that is what I must be charitable enough to suppose! I fear that many are like the huge corn monopolist—they buy the Doctrine of Election, but keep it to themselves. They believe it is true, yet they never preach it! They say that all the distinguishing Doctrines of Grace are true, but they never proclaim them to others. There are Particular Baptists who are as sound in doctrine as any of us, but, unfortunately, they never make any sound about it—and though they are very sound when alone, they are very unsound when they come into their pulpits, for they never preach Doctrine there! I say, swing the gate wide open and come in, all you children of God! I am sure there are no poisonous weeds in my Master’s field! If the Doctrine is a true one, it cannot hurt the child of God. And so, as it is the Truth of God, you may feast upon it till your soul is satisfied and no harm will come of it! The idea of reserve in preaching—keeping back some Doctrines because they are not fit to be preached—I will repeat what I have said before—it is a piece of most abominable impudence on the part of man to say that anything which God has revealed is unfit to be preached! If it is unfit to be preached, I am sure the Almighty would never have revealed it to us. No, like the old man described by Solomon, these preachers who do not proclaim good, sound Doctrine, are “afraid of that which is high.” It is a mark of their senility that they fear to talk of these great things! God was not afraid to write them and we, therefore, ought not to be afraid to preach them! The Doctrine field is a glorious field, Beloved—go into it often and glean—you may find, there, many a bushel of the finest wheat every day!

Then, next, God has a field called Promise field. On that I need not dwell, for many of you have often been there. But let us just take an ear or two out of one of the sheaves and show them to you, that you may be tempted to go into the field to glean more for yourselves. Here is one—“The mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed; but My kindness shall not depart from you, neither shall the covenant of My peace be removed, says the Lord that has mercy on you.” There is a heavy ear for you! Now for another—“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you: when you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon you.” Here is another—it has a short stalk, but there is a great deal of corn in it—“My Grace is sufficient for you.” Here is another. “Fear you not, for I am with you.” Here is another one. “Let not your heart be troubled: you believe in God, believe also in Me. In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto Myself; that where I am, there you may also be.” There is the promise of Christ’s glorious Second Coming and is not that a heavy ear of wheat for the Lord’s children to pick up? Yes, Beloved, we can say of the Promise field what cannot be said of any farmer’s field in England, namely, that it is so rich a field it cannot be richer! And it has so many ears of corn in it that you could not put in another one. As the poet sings—

*“How firm a foundation, you saints of the Lord,
Is laid for your faith in His excellent Word!
What more can He say than to you He has said,
You who unto Jesus for refuge have fled?”*

Go and glean in that field, Christian! It is all your own, every ear of it! Pull great handfuls out of the sheaves, if you like, for you are truly welcome to all you can find!

Then there is Ordinance field. A great deal of corn grows in that field. One part of it reminds us of the ordinance of Believers’ Baptism and, verily, God’s children are greatly profited even by the sight of the Baptism of others! It comforts and cheers them—and helps them to renew their own dedication vow to the Lord Most High. But I must not detain you long in this field, though it is, to

many of us, a very hallowed spot. Some of my friends never go into this field at all, it is too damp a soil for them—and though the corn is very fine and very high, they are afraid to go there. Let us leave that part of the field and pass on to the place of Communion. Oh, it is sweet, Divinely sweet, to sit at the Table of our Lord, to kisses of His mouth, “and have we not, there, tasted His love and proved it to be “better than wine””? Beloved, go into the Ordinance field! Walk in the ordinances of the Lord, blameless, and do not despise either of them. Keep His Commandments, for so will you find a great reward and so will He fill your souls with marrow and fatness!

But God has one field on a hill which is as rich as any of the others! And, indeed, you cannot really and truly go into any of the other fields unless you go through this one, for the road to the other fields lies through this one, which is called the field of fellowship and communion with Christ. Ah, that is the field to glean in! Some of you have only runthrough it, you have not stopped in it. But he who mows how to abide in it and to walk about it, never loses anything, but gains much. Beloved, it is only in proportion as we hold fellowship with Christ and commune with Him, that either ordinances, or Doctrines, or promises can profit us. All those other things are dry and barren unless we have entered into the love of Christ, unless we have realized our union with Him, unless we have a sympathy with His heart, unless we bear His likeness, unless we dwell continually with Him, feel His love and are ravished with His delights. I am sorry to say that few Christians think as much as they ought of this field—it is enough for them to be sound in doctrine and tolerably correct in practice—they do not think as much as they should about holding fellowship with Christ. I am sure, if they did, there would not be half so many evil tempers as there are, nor half so much pride and not a tenth so much sloth if our Brothers and Sisters went into that field more often! Oh, it is a blessed one! There is no field like that one! You may go into it and revel in delights, for it is full of everything good that the heart can wish, or the soul imagine, or the mind conceive! Blessed, blessed field is that! And God leaves the gates of that field wide open for every Believer!

Children of God, go into all these fields. Do not despise any of them, but go and glean in them all, for there is the richest gleaning in all creation!

II. Now, in the second place, we have to think and speak of A HUMBLE GLEANER. Ruth was a gleaner and she may serve as an illustration of what every Believer should be in the fields of God.

He should be a gleaner, and he may take a whole sheaf home if he likes. He may be something more than a gleaner if he can be, but I use the figure of a gleaner because I believe that is the most a Christian ever is. Some may ask, “Why does not the Christian go and reap all the field and take all the corn home with him?” So he may, if he can. If he likes to take a whole sheaf on his back and go home with it, he may do so. And if he will bring a great wagon and carry away all there is in the field, he may have it all! But, generally, our faith is so small that we can only glean—we take away but a little of the blessing which God has prepared so abundantly. And though, sometimes faith does take and enjoy much, yet, when we compare it with what there is to be enjoyed, a gleaner is the true picture of faith—but more especially of little faith. All it can do is to glean—it cannot cart the wheat home, or carry a sheaf on its shoulders—it can only take it up, ear by ear.

Again, I may remark, that the gleaner, in her business, has to endure much toil and fatigue. She rises early in the morning and trudges off to a field. If that is shut, she trudges to another. And if that one is closed, or the corn has all been gleaned, she goes to another. All day long, though the sun is shining on her, except when she sits down under a tree to rest and refresh herself a little, she still goes on stooping and gathering up her ears of corn. And she returns not home till nightfall, for she desires, if the field is good, to pick up all she can in the day, and she would not like to go back unless her arms were full of the rich corn she so much desires to find.

Beloved, so let it be with every Believer! Let him not be afraid of a little weariness in his Master’s service. If the gleaning is good, the spiritual gleaner will not mind fatigue in gathering it. One says, “I walk five miles every Sunday to Chapel.” Another says, “I walk six or seven miles.” Very well, if it is the Gospel, it is worth not only walking six or seven miles, but 60 or seventy, for it will pay you well! The gleaner must look for some toil and trouble. He must not expect that everything will come to him very easily. We must not think that it is always the field next to our house that is

to be gleaned—it may be a field at the most distant end of the village! If so, let us go trudging off to it, that we may get our hands and arms full.

But I remark, next, that the gleaner has to stoop for every ear she gets. Why is it that proud people do not profit under the Word of God? Why is it that your grand folk cannot get any good out of many Gospel ministers? Why, because they want the ministers to pick up the corn for them! And beside that, many of the ministers hold it so high above their heads that they can scarcely see it. They say, “Here is something wonderful,” and they admire the cleverness of the man who holds it up! Now, I like to scatter the corn on the ground as much as I can. I do not mean to hold it up so high that you cannot reach it. One reason is that I cannot—I have not the talent to hold it up where you cannot see it—my ability will only allow me to just throw the corn on the ground, so that the people can pick it up. And if it is thrown on the ground, then all can get it. If we preach only to the rich, they can understand, but the poor cannot. But when we preach to the poor, the rich can understand it if they like. And if they do not like it, they can go somewhere else. I believe that the real gleaner, the ones who get any spiritual food, will have to stoop to pick it up—and I would gladly stoop to know and understand the Gospel! It is worth while going anywhere to hear the Gospel, but, nowadays, people must have fine steeples to their places of worship, fine gowns for their ministers and they must preach most eloquently. But that is not the way the Lord ordained—He intended that there should be plain, simple, faithful preaching. It is by the foolishness of such preaching that He will save them that believe. Beloved Friends, remember that gleaners who are to get anything must expect to stoop.

Note, in the next place, that

what a gleaner gathers, she gets ear by ear. Sometimes, it is true, she gets a handful, but

that is the exception, not the rule. In the case of Ruth, handfuls were let fall on purpose for her, but the usual way is to glean ear by ear. The gleaner stoops and picks up, first one ear, and then another, and then another—only one ear at a time. Now, Beloved, where there are handfuls to be had at once, that is the place to go and glean! But if you cannot get handfuls, go and get ear by ear. I have heard of certain people who have been in the habit of hearing a favorite minister in London, saying, when they go to the seaside, “We cannot hear anybody after him. We shall not go to that Chapel any more.” So they stay at home all day on Sunday, I suppose forgetting that passage, “not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is.” They cannot get a handful and, therefore, they will not pick up an ear. So the poor creatures are starved and they are glad enough to get back home! They should have gone, if they could get but one ear—and he is a sorry minister who cannot give them that! And if they got only one ear, it would be worth having. If it is only six words of God, if we think of them, they will do us good. Let us be content, then, to glean ear by ear. Let us take away a whole sheaf with us if we can, but if we cannot do that, let us get the good corn an ear at a time. “Oh,” says a friend, “I cannot hear some ministers at all! They preach such a mangle-mangle of the Truth of God and error.” I know they do, but it will be a strange thing if you cannot get an ear or two of wheat, even from them! There is a great deal of straw—you are not required to take that away—but it will be remarkable if you cannot pick up an ear or two of good grain. You say, “The error that the man preaches distresses my mind.” No doubt it does, but the best way is to leave the lies alone and pick out the sound Truth of God—and if there is no sound Truth in the sermon, a good plan is to read it all backwards—and then it will be sure to be sound. I heard a man of that kind, once, and when he said a thing was so-and-so, I said to myself that it was not. And when he said such-and-such a thing would happen, I said it would not—and I then enjoyed the sermon! He said that the people of God, through their sin, would perish. I had only to put a, “not,” into his sentence, and what a sweet and comforting message it then was! That is the way, when you hear a bad sermon, to qualify what the preacher says. Then, after all, you can make his discourse suggest spiritual thoughts to you, and do you good! But you must be content, wherever you go to hear the Word, to pick up the corn ear by ear.

Note, next, that what the gleaner picks up, she keeps in her hands. She does not pick it up and then drop it down, as some do in their spiritual gleaning. There is a good thought at the beginning of the sermon, but you are all eager to hear another—and you let the first go. Then, towards the

end of the discourse, perhaps there is another flash and, in trying to catch that, you have forgotten all the rest! So, when the sermon is over, it is nearly all gone and you are about as wise as a gleaner who sets out in the morning and picks up one ear, then drop that and picks up another. She then drops that and pick up another. She would find, at night, that she had got—what? —that she had got nothing for all her trouble! It is just the same in hearing a sermon—some people pick up the ears and drop them as fast as they pick them up.

But one says, “I have kept nearly the whole of the sermon.” I am glad to hear it, my Friend, but just allow me to make a remark. Many a man, when he has nearly the whole sermon, loses it on the way home. Very much depends on our conduct on our way back from the House of God. I have heard of a Christian man who was seen hurrying home, one Sunday, with all his might. A friend asked him why he was in such haste. “Oh,” he said, “two or three Sundays ago, our minister gave us a most blessed discourse and I greatly enjoyed it. But as soon as I was outside the Chapel, there were two deacons and one pulled one way, and the other pulled the other way, till they tore the sermon all to pieces! And though it was a most blessed discourse, I did not remember a word of it when I got home—all the savor and unction had been taken out of it by those deacons—so I thought I would hurry home tonight and pray over the sermon without speaking to them at all.” It is always the best way, Beloved, to go straight home from your places of worship—if you begin your chit-chat about this thing and the other, you lose all the savor and unction of the discourse! Therefore I would advise you to go home as quickly as you can after the service—you might possibly, then, get more good than you usually do from the sermon and from the worship altogether!

Then, again, the gleaner takes the wheat home and threshes it. It is a blessed thing to thresh a sermon when you have heard it. Many persons thrash the preacher—but that is not half so good as threshing the sermon! They begin finding this fault and the other with him, and they think that is doing good—but it is not. Take the sermon, Beloved, when you have listened to it, lay it down on the floor of meditation, and beat it with the flail of prayer so you will get the corn out of it. But the sermon is no good unless you thresh it. Why, that is as if a gleaner should stow away her corn in the room, and the mice should find it—in that case, it would be a nuisance to her rather than a benefit. So, some people hear a sermon, and carry it home, and then allow their sins to eat it all up and thus it becomes an injury to them, rather than a blessing. But He who knows how to flail a sermon well, to put it into the threshing machine and thresh it well, has learned a good art, from which he shall profit much.

I have heard of an aged Scotchman, who, one Sunday morning, returned from “kirk” rather earlier than usual, and his wife, surprised to see him home so soon, said to him, “Donald, is the sermon all done?” “No,” he answered, “it is all said, that is what I mean by threshing it. And some of you are content if you carry the sermon home. You are willing enough, perhaps, to talk a little about it, but there is no thorough threshing of it by meditation and prayer.

And then, once more, the good woman, after threshing the corn, no doubt afterwards winnowed it. Ruth did this in the field, but you can scarcely do so with the sermons you hear—some of the winnowing must be done at home. Observe, too, that Ruth did not take the chaff home. She left that behind her in the field. It is an important thing to winnow every sermon that you hear. My dear Friends, I would not wish you to be spongy hearers who suck up everything that is poured into their ears. I would have you all to be winnowers, to separate the precious from the vile! With all ministers there is a certain quantity of chaff mixed with the corn, but I have noticed in some hearers a sad predilection to take all the chaff and leave the corn behind. One exclaims, when he gets out of the building, or even before, “That was a curious story that the preacher told—won’t it make a good anecdote for me at the next party I attend?” Another says, “Mr. Spurgeon used such-and-such an expression.” If you hear a man talk in that way, do you know what you should say to him? You should say, “Stop, Friend! We all have our faults and perhaps you have as many as anybody else—can you not tell us something Mr. Spurgeon said that was good?” “Oh, I don’t remember that. That is all gone!” Just so, people are ready to remember what is bad, but they soon forget anything that is good.

Let me advise you to winnow the sermon, to meditate upon it, to pray over it, to separate the chaff from the wheat and to take care of that which is good. That is the true art of heavenly gleanings—may the Lord teach us it, that we may become “rich to all the intents of bliss,” that we may be filled and satisfied with the favor and goodness of the Lord!

III. Now, in the last place, here is A GRACIOUS PERMISSION GIVEN. “Let her glean even among the sheaves, and reproach her not.”

Ruth had no right to go among the sheaves to glean, but Boaz gave her a right to go there by saying, “Let her do it.” For her to be allowed to go among the sheaves, in that part of the field where the wheat was not already carted, was a special favor, but to go among the sheaves and to have handfuls of corn dropped on purpose for her, was a further proof of the kindness of Boaz.

Shall I tell you the reasons that moved the heart of Boaz to let Ruth go and glean among the sheaves? One reason was, because he loved her. He would have her go there because he had conceived a great affection for her, which he afterwards displayed in due time. So the Lord lets His people come and glean among the sheaves because He loves them. Did you have a rich glean among the sheaves the other Sabbath? Did you carry home your sack, filled like the sacks of Benjamin’s brothers when they went back from Egypt? Did you have an abundance of the good corn of the land? Were you satisfied with favor and filled with the blessing of the Lord? That was all owing to your Master’s goodness! It was because He loved you that He dealt so bountifully with you. Look, I beseech you, on all your mercies as proofs of His love! Especially look on all your spiritual blessings as being tokens of His Grace. It will make your corn grind all the better and taste all the sweeter if you think that it is a proof of love that your sweet seasons, your high enjoyments, your blessed ravishments of spirit are so many proofs of your Lord’s affection to you. Boaz allowed Ruth to go and glean among the sheaves because of his love to her, so, Beloved, it is God’s Free Grace that lets us go among His sheaves and lets us lay hold of doctrinal blessings, promise blessings, or experience blessings. We have no right to be there of ourselves—it is all the Lord’s Free and Sovereign Grace that lets us go there!

There was another reason why Boaz let Ruth glean among the sheaves—because he was related to her. And that is why the Lord sometimes gives us such sweet mercies and takes us into His banqueting house, because He is related to us. He is our Brother, our Kinsman, allied to us by ties of blood. Yes, more than that, He is the Husband of His Church, and He may well let His wife go and glean among the sheaves, for all she gets is not lost to Him—it is only putting it out of one hand into the other since her interests and His are all one. So He may well say, “Beloved, take all you please. I am none the poorer, for you are Mine. You are My partner, you are My chosen one, you are My bride, so, take it, take it all, for it is still in the family and there is none the less, when you have taken all that you can.”

What more shall I say to you, my beloved Brothers and Sisters? Go glean, spiritually, as much as you can! Never lose an opportunity of getting a blessing! Glean at the Mercy Seat. Glean in the House of God. Glean in private meditation. Glean in reading pious books. Glean in associating with gracious men and women. Glean everywhere—wherever you go! And if you can pick up only an ear a day, you who are so much engaged in business and so much penned up by cares, if you can only spare five minutes, go glean a little—and if you cannot carry away a sheaf, get an ear. Or if you cannot get an ear, make sure of at least one grain. Take care to glean a little! If you cannot find much, get as much as you can.

Just one other remark, and then I will close. O child of God, never be afraid to glean! All there is in all your Lord’s fields is yours. Never think that your Master will be angry with you because you carry away so much of the good corn of the Kingdom. The only thing He is likely to be offended with you for is because you do not take enough! “There it is,” He says, “take it, take it, and eat it. Eat abundantly. Drink, yes, drink abundantly, O beloved!” If you find a sweet promise, suck all the honey out of the comb. And if you get hold of some blessed sheaf, do not be afraid to carry it away rejoicing. You have a right to it—let not Satan cheat you out of it! Sharpen up the sickle of your faith and go harvesting, for you may, if you will. And if you can, you may take a whole sheaf and carry it away for spiritual food. But if you cannot take a whole sheaf, the Lord teach you how

to glean among the sheaves, even as Ruth did in the fields of Boaz. And may He, in the greatness of His Grace, let fall a few handfuls on purpose for you, for His dear Son's sake! Amen.