

The Modern Brambles

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When we distinguish between God's ways in grace and His ways in government, we are not guilty of making a distinction without a difference. They differ widely.

Take as an example the case of the Apostle Paul. God's grace met him when he was in the flood-tide of his wicked opposition to Christ and His saints, he was saved, blessed and transformed. But this did not stop the working of God's righteous government on the earth, and many of his subsequent sufferings in the cause of Christ exactly suited his own previous misdeeds. He who "haling men and women, committed them to prison," had his full share of imprisonment in due season. He instigated the stoning of Stephen, and presently got stoned himself.

We needed the New Testament to give us the full revelation of the grace of God, but the Old Testament is of great value as giving us a large unfolding of the working of God's government. Observing His ways in the past, we are enlightened and warned as to what may be expected in the present; and we discover how amazingly apposite are these ancient histories. The Bible is indeed an up-to-date book.

The history of Abimelech, the ruthless and unscrupulous usurper in Israel, is given us in Judges 9. If you have not read that chapter recently, do so now and refresh your memory as to the details. Then specially notice the sarcastic parable which Jotham shouted from the top of Mount Gerizim, which, incidentally, is the first parable put on record. See if it does not strikingly fit the usurpers and tyrants with which Europe is cursed at the present moment: then consider if it does not furnish us with a forecast of what their end is going to be.

The parable concerned four "trees"; the olive, fig, vine and the bramble, or thorn-bush; each of which in turn was invited to become king over the trees. The olive had its fatness whereby both God and man were honoured. The fig-tree had its sweetness and good fruit. The vine had its wine which cheered God and man. Each had their own place in the scheme of creation and had no wish to be other than they were. The bramble had neither beauty nor utility: it was chiefly noted for its thorns, which displayed the curse resting on the vegetable creation as the fruit of man's sin, according to Genesis 3. 18. It was quite willing to accept promotion and lord it over others.

In verse 15 we see Jotham as a master of sarcasm and a man of prophetic vision. The shadow of a bramble! Anything less protective in the heat of Palestine can hardly be imagined. And the bramble invited them to trust in **that** with the alternative of being devoured! The cedars of Lebanon were to fall before the bramble's fire! In saying that, an element of prophecy appears, for the men of Shechem and others began by putting their trust in the wicked upstart Abimelech, but very soon an evil spirit sprang up between the two parties, which ended in fire from Abimelech consuming the men of Shechem and their tower, and Abimelech himself, being destroyed.

Over three millenniums have passed and again we see a large part of the earth falling under the domination of brambles — not one but three of them. Each is proceeding in the same fashion; not merely inviting but demanding that the peoples who are smaller numerically shall put their trust in their shadows. Some have reluctantly acquiesced and others have been violently assaulted and forced there. On the surface their actions look marvellously successful. Cedars of Lebanon have been devoured in the fires which have proceeded from the brambles.

But what was the end of the story recorded in Judges 9? Fire came out from Abimelech and devoured the men of Shechem; but when he thought to do the same to the men of Thebez instead of fire coming out from him a piece of a broken millstone came down from a woman of Thebez and dealt him a death-blow. The last two verses of the chapter point out that God's hand in government was behind the whole thing. The men of Shechem had been wicked accomplices in the murder of Gideon's sons, and God used Abimelech to chastise them as they deserved. Thus God made the wrath of Abimelech to praise the justice of Divine retribution, but when he essayed to go beyond this God restrained the remainder of his wrath and brought upon him the miserable destruction which he so richly deserved. Jotham's parable not only contained a prophecy but a curse, which was fulfilled.

God it was, who sent the evil spirit between Abimelech and the men of Shechem. **God it was,** who rendered again the wickedness of Abimelech. God, who rendered upon the heads of the men of Shechem all their evil. And we may ask in the words of Scripture, "Is God unrighteous who taketh vengeance?" Indeed He is not: He is very righteous. The modernistic teachings of these later days has produced a degenerate and effeminate religiosity which winces at the bare idea of God exerting His holy government in executing justice. He goes on executing it all the same; and before long we may witness further striking expressions of it.

When fire goes forth from brambles even cedars of Lebanon may be devoured; but when fire breaks out in the thorn-bushes themselves they soon disappear in smoke. Thus it has been, and without a doubt thus it again will be. When it will be, we do not know; but we do know that God is still on the throne and His government is inexorable. We wait for Him, and while we wait we have His word:

"Be still, and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth" (Ps. 46. 10).