

THE PREPARED WORM

by Howard Crosby

Crosby's sermon or meditation on the theme from Jonah 4:7, where God prepared a worm to destroy Jonah's shade, exploring how God uses small, unexpected instruments to accomplish His sovereign purposes.

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The Prepared Worm But God prepared a worm when the morning rose the next day, and it smote the gourd that it withered.—Jonah 4:7.

Just when Jonah, had felt the delight of the shadowing foliage and had begun to promise himself a most comfortable retreat against an Assyrian sun, the broad-leaved gourd withered. The morning had arrived and the heat was becoming more intense, when the glad shelter was removed, and the prophet's head was smitten with the scorching rays. "It is better for me to die than live," exclaimed the fainting Jonah. And what caused this calamity? A worm. And is that all? No! God prepared the worm. The worm was under orders from heaven, and while he, doubtless, ate into the gourd, with a good appetite, following the bent of his natural constitution, nevertheless he was acting in direct obedience to God. God prepared the worm. And yet in the sixth verse we read that God prepared the gourd. This is the record. "And the Lord God prepared a gourd and made it to come up over Jonah, that it might be a shadow over his head, to deliver him from his grief. So Jonah was exceedingly glad of the gourd." And then follows immediately: "But God prepared a worm, when the morning rose the next day, and he smote the gourd that it withered." Does God, then, build up in order to destroy? And does He give comfort to His creatures in order to torment them by its removal? So reasons the carnal heart, ready to complain, and looking on all God's conduct in its superficial aspect, its own selfish and sensuous advantage being the criterion of all its judgments. It is an easy counsel of Satan, when we are fainting by a withered gourd. "Curse God and die," the selfish soul is all ripe for such advice,—desperation is more inviting than faith. And there are but few Jobs who can resist the appeal to discontent and anger, in the face of Satan and wife combined, for when the natural depravity of our own hearts is supported by the entreaties of our nearest and dearest friends, hell's heaviest engine is brought against us. "I do well to be angry, even unto death," is the usual style in which we greet the afflictive providence of God. But a faith like Job's, that learns the lesson which the sorrow teaches, is rewarded, as was Job's, by the presence and communion of God, and by a satisfaction with His holy and righteous will.

Let us endeavor to understand some of the facts connected with our afflictions, as disclosed by the Word of God, in order that we may be prepared to follow Job rather than Jonah.

I. In the first place, God is the author of affliction. "Affliction cometh not forth out of the dust, neither doth trouble spring out of the ground." God asserts most positively in His Word, that all the losses in the world are sent by Him. He calls them chastisements from His fatherly hand. "I make peace and create evil," saith the Lord. This is not evil in the sense of wickedness. God does not create wickedness—but it is evil in the sense of affliction and trouble, the opposite of peace in the contrasted clause, "I make peace and create evil." That is, God is the author equally of prosperity and adversity to His creatures. If it were not so, we should have to imagine certain powers in God's universe not subject to His almighty control, which would be an absurdity. "Shall there be evil in a city and the Lord hath not done it?" It is in this sense of God's hand in adversity that the psalmist cries, "Thou, O God, hast proved us: thou hast tried us as silver is tried; thou broughtest

us into the net, thou laidest affliction upon our loins"; and again, "Thy wrath lieth hard upon me, and thou hast afflicted me with all thy waves." God may send affliction by permitting Satan to afflict, but still God is the author of the affliction. He could prevent it, but He permits it. Indeed, it is, perhaps, true that all our losses and injuries in this world are Satan's inflictions, that this ever-active spirit of evil is constantly using the agencies of the natural world for our harm and destruction, and we are preserved simply by the interposing and restraining providence of God. When Satan wished to afflict Job, he sought and gained permission of the Lord. Job's calamities were clearly Satan's blows, and yet Job addresses God, "Why hast thou set me as a mark against thee, so that I am a burden to myself?" So, again, the diseased woman, who heard our Savior's healing words on the Sabbath day and was cured, is described by the same divine Physician (whose diagnosis cannot be questioned) as one whom Satan had bound for eighteen years. Under such examples, I cannot believe we err in attributing all our sicknesses and pains of body to the permitted agency of our arch-adversary.

They are tokens of his power over our race, for he is the prince of this world, and it is only in God that we find protection from his cruel scepter. God suffers us to feel his inflictions in order to remove our affections from the world and to place them more devotedly upon our Heavenly Father. God is thus most truly the author of affliction, whatever may be the agencies He uses in the course of His providence.

II. He uses the natural laws of the world as His agents in afflicting. These laws may be thus used permissively by Satan in other ways than in sickness or not, but the text shows us clearly that God so uses them. "God prepared a worm." There is a world of instruction in that brief statement. It infinitely transcends the science of the naturalist. Bring the most learned explorers of nature together to this gourd of Jonah, and show them this little worm creeping toward the thick stalk. Let them see it move its many feet and flexible body till it reaches the goal of its instinct. Now it uses its gnawing jaws upon the woody fibre; deeper and deeper it pierces the stem; now it reaches the innermost pith, and again returns upon its course. The current of the gourd's life is marred; the leaves droop, and its shelter is gone. Now, ye scientific men, what made that gourd wither? Hear them philosophize. Yon worm is a caterpillar, whose appropriate food is the ricinus communis, this very gourd with its palmate leaves and red-tinted flower. The worm has merely followed the impulses of its nature in seeking that tree-like plant, and the equally natural result of its feeding upon the stalk has been the failure of the tree's nourishment, and with the failure the foliage has, of course, withered. Well, is that all science can say? Yes, all. It is little more than that a horse is a horse. It explains nothing but the most proximate causes. It classifies facts, and then leaves us gaping into the abyss of causation as ignorant as ever. Four words from the Bible carry us back to the ultimate cause, the first mover in this gourd's withering. Science talks of laws, but these four words go behind all laws to the Maker of laws, to Him in whose hands are all things. "God prepared a worm." What! says science; drag God in to explain anything? Nay, God drags all in to effect His plans. He has made all things, however great, however small, for Himself. And these things which you call laws are only the methods of His activity, and these methods He has formed for the very ends which He accomplishes by them. The worm which crawls to Jonah's gourd was created by God to destroy that plant, and the law of that worm's movement was ordained for that destruction, as well as for all else which it accomplishes. The mind is satisfied when it finds a mind, a purpose, a plan in every event which it observes, and the pious heart is rejoiced to know

that it is a Father's mind and purpose and plan which directs every movement, even to the crawling of a worm. "God prepared a gourd—God prepared a worm"; no accident brought the gourd there; no accident brought the worm there. God stood in a like relation to both. He sent the gourd, through nature, to comfort Jonah. He sent the worm, through nature, to trouble Jonah. Nature is a forlorn object to study unless we find it a mirror to reflect God. It is only as we see it, the result of His handiwork and His instrument in governing His creatures, that nature has a glory. Then it is ennobled; then it has a meaning that no mere naturalist can fathom, but which renders valuable the researches of science with its classifications.

III. God is just in afflicting us. If we look at God simply as the Maker and Owner of His creatures, we could easily deduce His right to afflict. "Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own?" says the Creator; and he must be a daring soul who disputes the force of this question. "Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, 'Why hast thou made me thus?'" But we are not left to this view of God's right to afflict. God has entered into covenant with us. He has said, "Do ye according to my commandments, and ye shall live." This was the purport of His very first communication to our race in Adam. It treated of obedience and reward, of disobedience and punishment. And what is the record of our race since? Have we obeyed or have we disobeyed? Is there the slightest claim in us for the reward? Is there not the most complete demand for the punishment? What sin in the whole catalog of sin has been omitted by man? Enmity to man and God, pride, ingratitude, and rebellion have marked the history of mankind. And are you and I exceptions? Look at our years of worldliness, years of sinful affections, years of opposition to the Word and Spirit, years of selfishness, and then let us confess our full participation in the general depravity. We are unclean in our natures and by practise, and so, under the covenant which our Maker was pleased to form for us, we can only deserve punishment. Do we then complain in affliction? Surely, if God would be just in casting us down to hell for our rebellion and disobedience, He is just in laying upon us our earthly afflictions. Shall the Jonah, who ran away from the Lord's commandment, and afterward flung His anger in the face of His God, shall such an one feel that God is unjust in preparing a worm to destroy his gourd? By what arithmetic is such a balance cast? It becomes us, rather, to take up the words of David and cry, "I acknowledge my transgression; and my sin is ever before me. Against thee, thee only, have I sinned and done this evil in thy sight, that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest!"

IV. God afflicts us in His love. With all Jonah's sins against God, it was not to punish him that God prepared a worm. God is long-suffering and withholds punishment in His desire that all men may come to repentance. If punishment were God's aim in affliction, our afflictions would be infinitely greater than they are, for punishment would be apportioned to desert, and our desert is eternal condemnation; God's aim in affliction is our restoration, our improvement. By it He shakes us off from our dependence upon a world which, however it might please us for the moment, would cheat us sadly in the end. By it He reminds us of Himself as our source of strength and happiness, and then brings us to the unfailing fountain of peace, which our earthly prosperity would hide from our eyes. By it He teaches us to aspire to higher spiritual attainment, to grow in grace, to cultivate a more heavenly disposition of mind and heart.

These are the uses of adversity. Christians who have come through scenes of trial, and whose thankful declaration is, "It was good for me to be afflicted," certify to these blest results. They tell us that they believe nothing else but the severe losses they sustained could have freed them from

the fascinations of the world—nothing else could have made holy things so delightful to their soul. Now, such an experience is not the result of God's anger but of God's love. However harsh the voice of God may seem to us, it is yet a Father's voice, with a Father's heart behind it. It is, therefore, meant not to drive us away to seek a hiding corner, but to bring us directly to Himself. The same love which sent the affliction will receive the afflicted. God prepares gourds, and God prepares worms; and He uses each to build up faith and holiness in the human heart. In earnest seeking after God, in complete consecration to His holy will and service, is to be found the surest avoidance of the worm. If we can learn our lesson without the worm, the worm will not be sent to gnaw our gourd to ruins. The nearer our life to Jesus the more free shall we be from the sting of affliction. Had Jonah been an obedient and submissive prophet his gourd would not have withered. But alas! Jonah and ourselves need correction to keep our faces heavenward. Forgetfulness and indulgence plant their weeds in our Lord's garden, and they must be rooted up by force. It is for our own good, and it is infinite love which decrees it.

Now note some inferences from the subject under consideration.

First. If God afflicts, how foolish it is to go to the world for relief? Is the world greater than God? We may be sure that any comfort the world can give, as against God's affliction, must be dangerous. It is a contest with God, which God may allow to be successful, but only for the greater condemnation thereafter. The world's relief is not a cure but an opiate. It stupefies, but does not give health and strength. The world's relief is a temporary application—a lull before a fiercer storm. The world's relief is a determination not to heed the lesson God sends us; it is the invention of frivolity, and not the device of wisdom. More slumber, more pleasure, and more worldly care are three favorite medicaments the world uses in these cases—anodynes which only weaken the system and prepare it for more fearful suffering. God wishes to awaken the mind by affliction, and man immediately prescribes a narcotic. The great Physician brings the affliction for our good; we turn to quackery to destroy the effects of the divine medicine. Ah! the day is coming when God shall appear as no longer our Savior but our Judge, if this be our treatment of His love. "Because I have called and ye refused; I have stretched out my hand and no man regarded; but ye have set at naught all my counsel, and would none of my reproof; I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh; when your fear cometh as desolation, and your destruction cometh as a whirlwind."

Secondly. If God prepares worms, then worms at once form an interesting study for us. We cannot see a caterpillar upon the leaf, but we know God has a mission for that worm. He is an ambassador of the Most High on his way to perform his Master's will. The headache, which unfits us for our ordinary occupation, is more than a headache. It is the voice of our God. Let us listen to the next headache and hear what God would have us learn. Every bird and beast, every raindrop and sunbeam, every breath of wind, and every event, however small, are the writings of a heavenly scribe. Let us study God's providence. It is all a message of love to us. We shall find out infinitely more in this study than in deciphering the hieroglyphics of Egypt. We shall find correction, expostulation, comfort, encouragement and instruction; and the more we look, the more we shall see. We shall become adepts in the high art of interpreting the acts of God toward us, and in this, as in prayer, hold constant communion with our divine Redeemer.

Thirdly. When our gourds wither it is a proof that God is near. We should be ready to say with Jacob, "Surely the Lord is in this place." Prayer and humiliation are now our appropriate exercises. God has put forth His hand to summon us to these duties. Our gourd is gone, but our God is not gone, He can protect far better than a gourd. He will more than make up all our losses. Let us go to Him, and our dark night will make the day-dawn more brilliant. My dying fellow-sinner, do not, I beseech you, grow angry under God's severe dispensations. You do not well to be angry. God is near you with a blessing in His hand for you. He has a lesson for you to learn which will make you wise unto salvation.

Say, will you learn it? If not, God is near you to condemn you. Oh! dread the alternative, and be wise to say in your heart, "Blest be my God and Father, who prepared the worm to destroy my broad-leaved gourd!"

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