

# Winter Afore Harvest or the Soul's Growth in Grace - Part 1

by J.C. Philpot

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*J.C. Philpot's sermon explores the concept of growth in grace through the metaphor of seasonal changes in spiritual life, emphasizing the necessity of divine beginnings and the transformative power of supernatural light.*

**Scripture:** 2 Peter 3:18

**Topics:** "Spiritual Growth", "Sanctification"

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## Description

J.C. Philpot preaches about the doctrine of growth in grace, emphasizing the stages of Spring, Summer, Winter, and Harvest in the divine life. He explains that true religion begins with a supernatural light and life entering the soul, leading to new feelings and sensations of guilt, wrath, and mercy. Philpot delves into the expansion of faith and hope in the soul as it receives the divine testimony and experiences the warmth of God's love, guiding believers through the journey of spiritual growth and development.

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## Transcript

Isaiah 18:5,6

Preached at Providence Chapel, Oakham, on Lord's Day Morning, 20th August, 1837.

"For afore the harvest, when the bud is perfect, and the sour grape is ripening in the flower, he shall both cut off the sprigs with pruning hooks, and take away and cut down the branches. They shall be left together unto the fowls of the mountains, and to the beasts of the earth: and the fowls shall summer upon them, and all the beasts of the earth shall winter upon them." Isa 18:5-6

No one, I think, who reads the Word of God with an enlightened eye can deny that there is contained in it such a doctrine as growth in grace. Peter says expressly, "Grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" 2Pe 3:18. The faith of the Thessalonians was said "to grow exceedingly" 2Th 1:3. And thus we read of degrees of faith, from "little faith" Mt 6:30, "weak faith" Ro 14:1, faith "as a grain of mustard seed" Mt 17:20, to "great faith" Mt 15:28, "strong faith" Ro 4:20, "fullness of faith" Ac 6:8, and "full assurance of faith" Heb 10:22.

Figures also and comparisons are made use of in the Word of truth which clearly point to the same doctrine. Thus the divine life is compared sometimes to the course of the sun: "The path of the just is as

the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day" Pr 4:18; sometimes to the growth of corn, "first the blade, then the ear, after that, the full corn in the ear" Mr 4:28; sometimes to the increase of the human body, as commencing with "new-born babes" 1Pe 2:2, and advancing on to "little children", "young men" and "fathers" 1Jo 2:12-14; sometimes to a race, where the runner "forgets those things which are behind, and reaches forth unto those things which are before" Php 3:13. The very idea indeed of life implies advance, growth, progress, increase. Lambs grow up into sheep, vine buds into vine branches Joh 15:5, slips into trees Isa 17:10 Isa 61:3, sons into fathers 1Ti 1:18 1Ti 5:1. Christians are not gate-posts, but palm trees and cedars Ps 92:12; not loungers on half-pay, but soldiers warring a good warfare 1Ti 1:18; not idlers at home on armchairs and sofas, but travellers and pilgrims seeking a country; not careless, and at ease, like Laish and Moab Jud 18:7 Jer 48:11, but pressed out of measure by trials and temptations, so as at times to despair even of life 2Co 1:8. Their grand distinguishing mark then is, that they grow; and, therefore, absence of growth implies absence of life. Hypocrites, indeed, may grow in hypocrisy, Pharisees in self-righteousness, Arminians in fleshly perfection, dead Calvinists in head-knowledge, proud professors in presumption, self-deceivers in delusion, and the untried and unexercised in vain confidence. But the dead never grow in the divine life, for "the root of the matter" is not in them Job 19:28.

But the question at once arises: "What is growth in grace? What is its nature, and in what does it consist? Is it the same thing as what is usually called ' progressive sanctification'? and is it meant thereby that our nature grows holier and holier, and our heart purer and purer? Does growth in grace imply that besetting sins gradually become weaker, temptations less powerful, the lust of the flesh less seducing; and that our Adam nature, our old man, is improved and transmuted into grace, as the crab tree of the hedge has, by long and patient cultivation, become changed into the apple tree of the garden?" No, by no means. Painful experience has taught me the contrary, and shown me that progressive sanctification has no foundation in the Word of God, and no reality in the hearts of His people.

The answer, then, to the question, "What is growth in grace?" is contained, I believe, in the text, and I shall therefore endeavour to unfold it in an experimental manner according to the ability which God may give me. The text speaks of three distinct stages in divine life, Spring, Harvest, and an intermediate state between the two which we may call Winter. We shall indeed find as we proceed that the Spring is divided into two stages, the latter of which we may term Summer; and thus growth in grace is compared to the advance of the seasons in the year. But there is this remarkable difference between the natural and the spiritual seasons, between growth in nature and growth in grace, that the succession of seasons is not the same in each. Nature commences with blooming spring, advances on to glowing summer, ripens into yellow harvest, and dies away in dreary winter. Grace, according to the line of experience that I am about to describe, commences with Spring -with "the bud", and "the flower of the sour grape". Thence it advances on to Summer, when "the bud is perfect", and "the sour grape is ripening in the flower". Does not Harvest immediately follow? Alas! no. "Afore the harvest" another seasons comes. Between summer and it, Winter -a long dreary winter intervenes. Thus, the order of seasons in the divine life is not spring, summer, harvest, winter: but spring, summer, winter, harvest.

Let us see if this order agrees with the Scriptures of truth, and with the experimental teachings of God in the soul. All true religion has a beginning, and a beginning, too, marked, clear and distinct. That the entrance of divine light into the soul, the first communications of supernatural life, the first manifestations of an unknown God, the first buddings forth of a new nature, the first intercourse of man with his Maker; that all these hitherto unfelt, unthought of, uncared for, undesired transactions should take place in the

soul, and the soul be ignorant of them, should know neither their time nor their place, is a contradiction.

The evidence of feeling is as strong, as distinct, as perceptible as the evidence of sight. I know by sight that this object is black and that white. I know as certainly by feeling that this substance is cold and that hot. I may not be able to tell why the one is hot and the other cold, but I know the fact that they are so. Thus a new-born soul may not be able to tell why it feels, nor whence those feelings arise; but it is as conscious that it does feel as that it exists. It suits well the empty profession of the day to talk about early piety, and convictions from childhood, and Sunday school religion, and baptismal regeneration, and infant lispings, and the dawnings of the youthful mind.

"The privilege of pious parents, of family religion, of the domestic altar, of a gospel ministry, of obedience to ordinances, of a father's prayers, of a mother's instruction"-who has not heard these things brought forward again and again as the beginning of what is called Christian conversion and decided piety? Many of these things are well in their place, and not to be despised or neglected; but when they are held up as the almost necessary beginning of a work altogether heavenly and supernatural, they must be set aside.

Thousands have had these things who have perished in their sins; and thousands have not had them who have been saved with an everlasting salvation. A true beginning is a beginning felt. I will not say that we must be able to point out the moment, the hour, the day or the week, though the nearer we approach the precision of time, the nearer we approach to a satisfactory evidence. But the season, the time within certain limits, when new feelings, new emotions, new wants, new desires arose in the heart, can never be forgotten by one who has really experienced them.

To smother over, to mystify, to smuggle up the beginning is to throw discredit on the whole. If the beginning be wrong, all is wrong. If there be no divine beginning, there can be no divine middle, and no divine end; and if the first step be false, every successive step will partake of the original error. If a man, therefore, who professes to be walking in the way never knew the door, and never found it a strait and narrow one, he has clambered over the wall, and is a thief and a robber. His sentence is already recorded. "Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness" Mt 22:13.

True religion then begins with an entrance into the soul of supernatural light and supernatural life. How or why it comes the soul knows not; for "the wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh and whither it goeth; so is every one that is born of the Spirit" Joh 3:8. The wind itself is not seen, but its effects are felt. The sound of a going is heard "in the tops of the mulberry trees" 1Ch 14:15, where God Himself is not seen. The voice of the Lord powerful and full of majesty was heard by those who saw no similitude De 4:12. Thus effects are felt, though causes are unknown. Streams flow into the heart from a hidden source; rays of light beam into the soul from an unrisen sun; and kindlings of life awaken in us a new existence out of an unseen fountain. The new-born babe feels life in all its limbs, though it knows not yet the earthly father from whence that natural life sprung. And thus new-born souls are conscious of feelings hitherto unpossessed, and are sensible of a tide of life, mysterious and incomprehensible, ebbing and flowing in their heart, though "Abba Father" has not yet burst from their lips.

A man's body is alive to every feeling, from a pin scratch to a mortal wound, from a passing ache to an incurable disease. The heart cannot flutter or intermit for a single second its wonted stroke without a peculiar sensation that accompanies it, notices it and registers it. Shall feelings, then, be the mark and evidence of natural life, and not of spiritual? Shall our ignoble part, the creature of a day, our perishing

body, our dust of dust, have sensations to register every pain and every pleasure, and be tremblingly alive to every change without and every change within; and shall not our immortal soul be equally endowed with a similar barometer to fluctuate up and down the scale of spiritual life? We must lay it down then at the very threshold of vital godliness, that if a man has not been conscious of new feelings, and cannot point out, with more or less precision, some particular period, some never-to-be-forgotten season, when these feelings came unbidden into his heart, he has not yet passed from death into life. He is not in Christ, if he is not a new creature 2Co 5:17. But the question is arising to your lips, "What are these new feelings? Describe them, if you will or can, that we may compare our heart with them, for as in water face answereth to face, so does the heart of man to man". I believe, then, that the first sensation of a new-born soul is that of light. "The entrance of Thy words giveth light" Ps 119:130. "The people which sat in darkness saw great light; and to them which sat in the region and shadow of death, light is sprung up" Mt 4:16. This was the light from heaven above the brightness of the sun, which struck persecuting Saul to the earth, and of which he afterwards said, "God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts" 2Co 4:6.

But, together with this ray of supernatural light, and blended with it in mysterious union, supernatural life flows into the soul. "Of His own will begat He us with the word of truth" Jas 1:18. "You hath He quickened"-that is, made alive-"who were dead in trespasses and sins" Eph 2:1. Every ray of natural light is not single, but sevenfold, as may be seen in the rainbow, where every distinct ray of the sun is broken into seven different colours. And thus the first ray of supernatural light which shines into the soul out of the Sun of righteousness is really not single, but manifold. Mingled with heavenly light, and inseparable from it, life, feeling and power, faith and prayer, godly fear and holy reverence, conviction of guilt and hungerings and thirstings after righteousness, flow into the heart. And it is this blended union of feelings which distinguishes the warm sunlight which melts the heart from the cold moonlight that enlightens the head. The latter begins and ends in hard, dry, barren knowledge, like the Aurora Borealis playing over the frozen snows of the north; whilst the former penetrates into and softens the secret depths of the soul, and carries with it a train of sensations altogether new, heavenly and divine.

Thus feeling is the first evidence of supernatural life-a feeling compounded of two distinct sensations, one referring to God, and the other referring to self. The same ray of light has manifested two opposite things, "for that which maketh manifest is light"; and the sinner sees at one and the same moment God and self, justice and guilt, power and helplessness, a holy law and a broken commandment, eternity and time, the purity of the Creator and the filthiness of the creature. And these things he sees, not merely as declared in the Bible, but as revealed in himself as personal realities, involving all his happiness or all his misery in time and in eternity. Thus it is with him as though a new existence had been communicated, and as if for the first time he had found there was a God.

It is as though all his days he had been asleep, and were now awakened-asleep upon the top of a mast, with the raging waves beneath; as if all his past life were a dream, and the dream were now at an end. He has been hunting butterflies, blowing soap bubbles, angling for minnows, picking daisies, building card-houses, and idling life away like an idiot or a madman. He had been perhaps wrapped up in a profession, smuggled into a church, daubed over with untempered mortar, advanced even to the office of a deacon, or mounted in a pulpit. He had learned to talk about Christ, and election, and grace, and fill his mouth with the language of Zion. And what did he know of these things? Nothing, absolutely nothing. Ignorant of his own ignorance of all kinds of ignorance the worst, he thought himself rich, and increased with goods, and to have need of nothing, and knew not he was wretched, and miserable, and poor, and

blind, and naked Re 3:17.

But one ray of supernatural light, penetrating through the veil spread over the heart, has revealed that terrible secret—a just God, who will by no means clear the guilty. This piercing ray has torn away the bed too short, and stripped off the covering too narrow. It has rent asunder "the changeable suits of apparel, and the mantles, and the wimples, and the crisping pins, the glasses, and the fine linen, and the hoods and the veils, and it shall come to pass that instead of sweet smell there shall be stink; and instead of a girdle a rent; and instead of well set hair baldness; and instead of a stomacher a girding of sackcloth; and burning instead of beauty" Isa 3:22-24.

A sudden, peculiar conviction has rushed into the soul. One absorbing feeling has seized fast hold of it, and well nigh banished every other. "There is a God, and I am a sinner before Him", is written upon the heart by the same divine finger that traced those fatal letters on the palace wall of the king of Babylon, which made the joints of his loins to be loosed, and his knees to smite one against another Da 5:5,6. "What shall I do? Where shall I go? What will become of me? Mercy, O God! Mercy, mercy! I am lost, ruined, undone! Fool, madman, wretch, monster that I have been! I have ruined my soul. O my sins, my sins! O eternity, eternity!" Such and similar cries and groans, though differing in depth and intensity, go up out of the new-born soul well nigh day and night at the first discovery of God and of itself. These feelings have taken such complete possession of the heart that it can find no rest except in calling upon God. This is the first pushing of the young bud through the bark, the first formation of the green shoot, wrapped up as yet in its leaves, and not opened to view. These are the first pangs and throes of the new birth before the tidings are brought, "A man-child is born". "What shall I do to be saved?" cried the jailer. "God be merciful to me a sinner!" exclaimed the publican. "Woe is me, for I am undone!" burst forth from the lips of Isaiah.

This season, then, of first convictions may be called the early spring, the March of the soul. The weather is still cold and the winds chilling and cutting, and the bud dares not yet open its bosom, though it is pushing on in growth and vigour. The brown scales are still wrapped over it, and though swelling and enlarging, it remains as yet closed up in itself.

But after some time, longer or shorter as He sees fit, but generally bearing a proportion to the degree and depth of the convictions, the Lord, I believe, usually bestows some gleam of His smiling countenance on the soul. The cause of this glimpse of love is unknown to the soul that enjoys it. But its effects and the feelings to which it gives rise cannot be hid. The change, the revolution, which this smile creates is well nigh as great as the first awakening. With it commences that manifested growth, that opening of the bud, which I have called the Spring of the soul. The bud when it first pushes through the bark contains in itself the flower, the fruit, and the seed. These are not added to it afterwards, but however covered up or concealed, are in it, an essential part and portion of it, from the beginning.

Thus, when the Holy Ghost quickens the soul, He plants within it, a new creature, perfect in all its parts. The child in its mother's womb has all the limbs of a man. Nor do new-born babes of grace differ from little children, young men, or fathers, in the number of their graces, but only in the growth and development of them. Thus in the new-born soul there is hope, which keeps it from despair; love, which at times gleams out of terror; and faith, which cleaves hard to the promise, in spite of unbelief. These buds, indeed, not being called forth by the beams of the sun, but being chilled and checked by the north wind that blows over the garden So 4:16, could not expand themselves, and were scarcely seen. But the first rays of the warm sun, the first genial breezes of the south wind that quieteth the earth Job 37:17, awaken, as it were, into a new existence these hidden, unopened buds.

The buds on all trees are formed many months before they burst forth into open leaf. The storms, and sleet, and frost do not destroy them, as in the elect, despair never swallows up hope, nor enmity love, nor unbelief faith. But they cannot unfold and expand their blossom, nor burst into growth, until "the winter is past, the rain is over and gone; the flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in the land". Then is the season "when the fig-tree putteth forth her green figs, and the vines with the tender grape give a good smell" So 2:11-13. Under this gleam, then, of sunshine, this first smile of a heavenly Father's love, the bud begins to open and unfold its bosom to meet the genial ray.

The first bud that expands itself to the sunshine is that of faith. But was not faith in the soul before? Yes, doubtless. And did not faith act upon and realise the things that are not seen? Most assuredly. Faith entered into the soul at the same moment as the first beam of supernatural light. Some persons are of the opinion that there is no faith in the soul whilst it is under the law, and that when deliverance comes, faith comes with it. To support their opinion they quote this text, "But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster" Ga 3:25, where "faith" means not the grace of faith, but the object of faith-that is, Jesus Christ.

Others assert that there is no faith but the full assurance of faith, and that all that falls short of this is no faith at all. But I would ask, "Is there any difference between a soul dead in sins and one quickened into spiritual life? Are there not fears, terrors, convictions, pangs, cries, groans, and a host of feelings in the one which are not in the other? Whence arises this sense of guilt and wrath, this remorse for the past, and terror of the future?" I answer because divine faith credits the divine testimony. Before the soul was quickened into spiritual life the holiness and justice of God were the same, His wrath against sin and the curse of His righteous law were the same. But the soul did not feel them. Why not? Because the word was not "mixed with faith in them that heard it" Heb 4:2. A divine principle was needed to credit the divine testimony. He had heard these things by the hearing of the ear in the dead, outward letter. He had not seen them by the seeing of the eye, by an inward revelation. If the soul did not believe the word which entered it, did not credit the commandment which came to it Ro 7:9, how could it fall beneath the power of it? It did not formerly care for eternal realities, because it did not believe them by a divine faith. But now it receives, credits and believes the testimony of God, and this very faith is the cause of its alarm. If it could cease to believe, it would cease to feel.

But whence comes it to pass that faith acts in so different a manner when the Sun of righteousness breaks in upon the soul? Simply because faith credits just such a testimony only as is revealed to it. Faith may be compared to a hand. My hand feels just according to the nature of the object which I grasp. I touch things hot or cold, rough or smooth, hard or soft. The hand is the same, and I touch the object in the same way; but I feel differently according to the different nature of the object. Or faith may be compared to the eye, which receives different impressions according as it looks upon different things; if upon things agreeable, impressions that are pleasant, if upon things disagreeable, impressions that are painful. But the eye is the same, and the mode of seeing is the same. Thus faith is the hand as well as the eye of the soul.

If God reveal to the conscience His wrath against sin, faith is the hand to receive and the eye to see this divine testimony. If God reveal to the soul pardon and mercy in Christ, the same hand opens to receive, the same eye uncloses to see the heavenly manifestation. Paul recounts Heb 11 the exploits of faith, such as subduing kingdoms, working righteousness, obtaining promises, stopping the mouths of lions, and performing many things of very different and dissimilar kinds. But he never tells us that the faith itself was different, or that Abel, Enoch, Noah, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, and the other saints, of whom the world was

not worthy, had all a different faith according to their different exploits. When the horror of great darkness fell upon Abraham, and God said to him, "Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs" Ge 15:13, the faith whereby he credited this divine testimony was the same as that by which he believed in the Lord, when He said, "So shall thy seed be" Ge 15:5, and He counted it to him for righteousness. Nay, Abraham's faith never was so strong as when it acted most in the dark, and bade him stretch forth his hand to slay his son. There is but "one faith", as well as but one Lord and one baptism. And therefore Paul says that "the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith" Ro 1:17; that is, the righteousness of God in the law to faith in the law, and the righteousness of God in the gospel to faith in the gospel.

But whilst the soul was labouring under deep convictions, faith was not seen, nor felt to be faith. Unbelief, doubts, fears, guilt, wrath, gloom, misery, all these heavy weights pressed faith down into the bottom of the slough. Faith could not lift up its head out of all the mud, and mire, and filth, under which it lay well nigh smothered. Its eyes were dim with weeping, a dreadful sound was in its ears, its arm seemed clean dried up, and its feet set fast in the stocks. The only sign of life was that it struggled upwards, and spread forth its hands in the midst of the waves, as he that swimmeth spreadeth forth his hands to swim Isa 25:11.

But as the sun shines, the bud of faith expands to receive the fostering ray. Mercy now appears in the place of wrath, and infinite compassion instead of infinite justice. The thick veil which had been spread over the promises, invitations and encouragements, is taken off. The Scriptures appear a new book, the gospel a new sound, the doctrines of grace new truths, and the blood of Christ a new salvation. The soul wonders it never saw these things before, and nothing now seems more easy and simple than to believe in the loving-kindness of God. The stone has been rolled from the sepulchre, and Lazarus has come forth. The night has passed away, and the morning appears. The mists that hung over the landscape have broken off, and the good land, the land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths that spring out of valleys and hills, lies stretched out to view. As faith credited before the divine testimony of wrath, so now it credits the divine testimony of mercy; and as the heaviness of the one before made it stoop, so the good word of the other now maketh it glad.

The second bud which expands to receive the warm sunshine is that of hope. It was, indeed, in the soul before. There is no new creation of this bud by the rays of the sun, but only an expansion, a development of it. In the midst of all the gloom and despondency which brooded over it, there was a secret something at the bottom of the soul which kept it from despair. When the floodgates of divine wrath are opened in the natural conscience of a reprobate, he is usually swept away by it into the blackness of darkness for ever. Saul falls upon his sword, and Judas hangs himself. In the natural conscience of a reprobate there is wrath in reality; and wrath, too, against the person as well as against the sin. In the spiritual conscience of the elect there is but wrath in apprehension; and that wrath against the sin, not against the person. Thus the vessels of wrath call upon the mountains and rocks to fall upon them and hide them -their persons-from the wrath of the Lamb. The vessels of mercy cry, "Pardon our iniquity; for it is great". Natural guilt drives the soul from God: "Let not God speak with us, lest we die" Ex 20:19. Spiritual guilt drives the soul to God: "Cast me not away from Thy presence" Ps 51:11; "Let us search and try our ways, and turn again to the Lord. Let us lift up our heart with our hands unto God in the heavens" La 3:40,41. A graceless professor never rides at anchor. He is moored to the shore by a silken thread. The first storm snaps his line, and drives him on the rocks of despair where concerning faith he makes shipwreck 1Ti 1:19. Thus of these castaways some are driven to the madhouse, and others to the halter; some pine away in their iniquities, and others curse God and die.

But an elect vessel of mercy can never be wrecked on such shoals as these. To his own apprehensions, his hope may perish from the Lord La 3:18, and "be removed like a tree" Job 19:10. But it is not really lost out of his heart. He still holds faith, and has not put away a good conscience. There is a "Who can tell?" struggling for life. As Jacob said of Esau, "Peradventure he will accept me"; and as the servants of Benhadad reasoned with their master, "We have heard that the kings of Israel are merciful kings; peradventure he will save thy life", so the new-born soul under spiritual convictions hopes against hope. This anchor holds him firm. And though he often fears his cable will snap, yet the anchor, being within the veil, linked on to the throne of God by the golden chain of eternal love, can neither break nor drive.

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