

Winter Afore Harvest or the Soul's Growth in Grace - Part 2

by J.C. Philpot

The sermon explores the essential role of hope and the necessary trials in the believer's journey towards spiritual maturity and grace.

Scripture: Job 8:15, Job 9:31, Psalm 39:7, Psalm 42:11, Psalm 55:6, Psalm 69:2, Psalm 78:7, Isaiah 48:18, Jeremiah 17:5, John 15:2

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Gods Mercy"

Description

J.C. Philpot preaches about the journey of hope in the soul, comparing it to a bud that blossoms into a flower under the genial ray of God's countenance. He emphasizes the importance of true hope centered in God, contrasting it with false hope rooted in self. Philpot delves into the spiritual growth of faith, hope, love, and other graces in the believer's soul, highlighting the need for a deep understanding of sin and the richness of God's mercy. He explains the necessity of spiritual trials as the divine Husbandman prunes the branches of nature and grace to deepen the soul's dependence on God and reveal the true condition of the heart.

Transcript

Isa 18:5,6

But hope in a storm and hope in a calm, hope in the bud and hope in the flower, though they differ not in nature, differ greatly in degree. Night and day do not alter the reality of things, but they widely alter their appearance. Hope shut up in a dungeon and looking through the prison bars, and hope walking abroad in the sunshine differ much in feeling, though they do not differ in kind. But we must not cut off hope's head, nor bury him alive in his cell, because he is shut up, and cannot come forth. Neither must we say that hope is only born on the same day that he comes out in his holiday attire.

But some would treat hope as badly as they treat faith, and allow him neither place nor name, birthright nor inheritance in the regenerated soul until deliverance comes, though it belongs especially to the poor Job 5:16, dwelleth in the heart that is sick Pr 13:12, and is the portion of those whose mouth is in the dust La 3:29. Such wise master-builders would allow the soldier no helmet 1Th 5:8, the sailor no anchor Heb 6:19, and the prisoner no stronghold Zec 9:12. But if he is joined to the living he has hope; and the hope of a living dog is better any day than the vain confidence of a dead lion Ec 9:4.

But under the genial ray of God's smiling countenance the bud opens, and hope bursts forth. And as it expands it looks upward to heaven, and rises towards its Author and Finisher, its Source and its End. All true grace looks upward, whilst counterfeits look downward. Thus true hope centres in God; false hope centres in self. "Hope thou in God", said David to his soul Ps 42:11. "And now, Lord, what wait I for? my hope is in Thee" Ps 39:7. "That they might set their hope in God, and not be as their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation" Ps 78:7-8. But false hope is a hope in self, that is to say, natural self. It is therefore compared to a rush, which grows out of the mire, and withereth before any other herb; and to the web which the spider spins out of its own bowels Job 8:11-14. I never yet found anything in self-I mean natural self-which raised up a living hope. I have known plenty of things to cause despair, such as pride, lust, covetousness, unbelief, infidelity, enmity, rebellion, hardness and carelessness. I have found in self mountains of sin to press out the life of hope, torrents of evil to sweep away the foundations of hope, and clouds of darkness to hide the very existence of hope. But I have never yet found in vile self, deceitful self, filthy self, black self, and hateful self, any one thing to beget or keep alive a spiritual hope. If I could, I should fall under that terrible sentence, whose sweeping edge cuts off thousands: "Cursed be the man that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm, and whose heart departeth from the Lord" Jer 17:5.

But what a mighty revolution takes place in the soul when the bud of hope bursts forth into flower! It was well nigh covered up with despair, as the bud is hidden by the green leaves that close around it; but it springs up out of despair, and the green leaves part asunder. Darkness, guilt, terror, heaviness, gloom, melancholy, forebodings of death and judgment brooded over the soul, like the unclean birds over Abraham's sacrifice. But hope, as Abraham of old, has driven them away. And now hope mounts upward to God. Hope has nothing to do with earth, but leaves flesh and self and the world, the servants and the asses, at the foot of the mount Ge 22:5, that it may have communion with Jehovah Jireh. Thus hope feeds upon the unseen things which faith realises.

Both faith and hope are engaged on the same things, but not in the same way. Faith credits, hope anticipates; faith realises, hope enjoys; faith is the hand which takes the fruit, hope is the mouth which feeds upon it. Thus a certain promise is made to Abraham that he shall have a son by Sarah. This was a revelation of divine possibility in human impossibility Mr 10:27, of supernatural power in creature helplessness Ro 4:19-22, to credit which revelation is the essence of spiritual faith. By faith Abraham realised this promise; by hope he enjoyed it. It was an unseen thing, an event to come to pass at twenty-five years distance, but faith made it present, and as such hope fed upon it. When Abraham held in his arms the newborn Isaac, the pleasure was only a fuller enjoyment of what he had before tasted. He now enjoyed in reality, in possession, what he had previously tasted in prospect, in anticipation. Thus true hope feeds upon present things, but upon present things only as pledges and foretastes of things future. It feeds upon Christ, the same yesterday, today, and for ever, and looks forward to no other salvation than that of which it now enjoys the foretaste. All other hope than this is a lie. To hope in the forgiveness of sin-of which there is no foretaste; in God-of whom there has been no manifestation; in salvation-of which there has been no pledge; in mercy-of which there has been no token; in everlasting happiness-of which there has been no inward enjoyment; is delusion and presumption. Of this building, ignorance digs the foundation, self-deceit rears the wall, and hypocrisy plasters on the untempered mortar. It is a refuge of lies, which the hail shall sweep away and the waters overflow.

The budding forth of hope and the opening of this heavenly flower, that only grows in the valley of Achor, the vale of trouble Ho 2:15 Jos 7:26, marg., is a season never to be forgotten. Well do I remember the place-a little garden, hidden by buildings, and overgrown with shrubs, where this flower opened in my soul.

But the buildings could not hide it, nor the evergreens shade it, nor the damp close it. The bud opened, the flower burst forth, and at the same moment the eye looked up, and the mouth uttered, "Whom have I in heaven but Thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside Thee".

If time permitted, I might show how in this spring of the soul the bud of every grace expanded in a similar way.

Love in the bud had scarcely strength to maintain its existence against the enmity of the carnal mind stirred up by the entrance of the Law. Like a tender graft it seemed as though it must wither away and die. But love in the flower is strong and vigorous. Love in the bud was not seen nor known to be love. The colour and beauty of the flower could not be gathered from the appearance of the bud. But love in the flower is known at once to be love. Like its divine Author, it cannot be hid Mr 7:24, but is known and read of all men.

So amidst the legal repentance and the sorrow that worketh death, which were wrapped around it, godly sorrow, whilst in the bud, could scarce be seen. It lay crouching beneath the leaves, hidden and indistinct. But being looked upon by the sun, it looks in its turn upon Him whom it hath pierced, and mourneth for Him as one that mourneth for his firstborn.

Godly fear, again in the bud was darkened and obscured by the fear which hath torment. Slavish fear was so strong that it drew away all the sap from filial fear. Darkness and damp, lowering clouds and a threatening sky, cherished the former, whilst they checked and chilled the latter. But as the life of the one is the death of the other, godly fear, when it bursts into flower, soon outgrows the shoot of slavish dread. When Abraham makes a feast for Isaac, Ishmael is turned out of doors. Love which casts out the fear that hath torment is the very life of that spiritual fear which is a fountain of life to depart from the snares of death.

Prayer is another grace of the Spirit which opens and expands its bud in this springtime of the soul. It had always been in the soul from the first entrance of spiritual light. "Behold, he prayeth" Ac 9:11, was the mark of regenerated Saul. But hitherto it had consisted of little else but sighs and groans. Access to God, enjoyment of His presence, sensible communion, holy familiarity, praise and blessing, and similar feelings of nearness were scarcely known. It had hitherto been more cries forced out by terror than prayer drawn forth by love. It was more the howl of the criminal, the cry of the leper, the groan of the desperate, the broken, interrupted gasping of the drowning or the dying than the soft, solemn, gentle, calm stream of nearness and access to God. There are two kinds of spiritual prayer. There is the prayer under guilt, and the prayer under mercy; the prayer of a heart overwhelmed, and the prayer of a heart overflowing; the prayer of distance, and the prayer of nearness; prayer interrupted with sobs and groans, intervals of silence and fits of sullenness, like a mountain stream rushing amid rocks and stones; and prayer flowing calmly and gently into the bosom of God, as the river of the valley glides into the bosom of the sea.

During this spring of the soul, all things connected with spiritual religion are full of sweetness. The Word of God is as honey and the honeycomb, the company of His children eagerly sought after, the ordinances of His house highly prized, and the message of His ministers gladly received. Almost every sermon brings some blessing, every prayer some refreshment, and every chapter some instruction or some consolation. Thus the soul grows up like the calf of the stall. Having tasted that the Lord is gracious, it feeds on the sincere milk of the Word, and grows thereby 1Pe 2:2,3.

Under these encouragements the second stage of spring, the summer of the soul, comes rapidly on. This is "the perfecting of the bud, the ripening of the sour grape in the flower"; not the ripening of the fruit, which takes place in autumn, but the ripening, that is, the maturing, the full completing, of the flower, which takes place in summer. "The perfecting of the bud" is its full expansion; "the ripening of the sour grape in the flower" is the ripening of the flower that contains the grape, not the ripening of the fruit after the flower is fallen. The fruit could not be fertilised if the flower were not perfected, but would drop off together with the flower, like the untimely figs of a fig-tree Re 6:13.

Thus, in this time of summer, budding hope expands into hope full-blown, faith in the shoot opens into faith in the blossom, and love in the green leaf ripens into love in the flower. In these warm days of summer, the sky is for the most part without a cloud. The peace of God keeps the heart and mind—the one from idolatry, and the other from confusion. Heaven seems at hand and eternity near; death under the feet, and hell out of sight. To him that walks in this happy path the pleasures and cares of the world, the things of time and sense, the vain pursuits of carnal men, the business of the shop and the field, the empty profession of thousands, the noise and bustle of a fleshly religion, all seem lighter than vanity. Being "transformed in the renewing of his mind", and thus conformed, in a faint measure, to Christ's image, he views things, in some degree, as the Lord Himself views them, for he has the mind of Christ 1Co 2:16, and sees light in God's light Ps 36:9. Thus sin becomes hateful, the carnal mind a burden, and the earth itself a wretched abode; and the soul cries, "Oh that I had wings like a dove! for then would I fly away and be at rest" Ps 55:6.

Who would not think this happy soul near to heaven, when it seems to be thus on the very borders of it? But it may be near it, and yet not enter into it; as the children of Israel were very near the land of Canaan forty years before they took possession of it; forty years of weary wandering in the wilderness, after their first pitching in Kadesh Nu 13:26, which was in the uttermost of the border of Edom Nu 20:16, and therefore close to the Holy Land.

There are lessons to be learnt, of which the soul at present knows little or nothing. There is an experience to be passed through, little, little dreamt of; a road to be travelled, as yet but little, little known. Harvest does not succeed summer in the kingdom of grace, as in the kingdom of nature. "Afore the harvest" another season comes. A long and dreary winter intervenes, and with winter comes the pruning knife of the heavenly Husbandman, who purgeth the vine, "that it may bring forth more fruit" Joh 15:2. "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." But why should this wintry season be necessary? What need of this sharp and severe discipline? Why should not the soul go on as it has begun? Why should it not proceed from strength to strength, and increase in faith, hope, and love, until its peace should be as a river, and its righteousness as the waves of the sea? Isa 48:18, We have indeed an abundance of preachers who tell us not only that it ought to be so, but that is actually is so. We have no lack of railway projectors, who will draw us out a line to heaven with neither hill nor dale, and scarcely an inclined place. Nor have we any want of fancy drawing masters, who will sketch us out a beautiful landscape, with heaven itself at the end, as easily as Martin paints his Egyptian colonnades and oriental palaces. But there are such persons as fire-side travellers and chimney-corner voyagers, and such architects as builders of castles in the air. Now, however pretty may be the descriptions of the one, or however beautiful the palaces of the other, the true pilgrim needs a guide who has traveled the road himself, and he that builds for eternity wants an architect who can lay a solid foundation at the first, and afterwards put every stone in its right place. We will leave, then, these speculators to their theories, and instead of speaking of things as they think the ought to be, [To be always telling us what we ought to do, is

to bid us draw water with a bucket which has a hole at the bottom; and I am sure free-will never yet mended this hole.] will endeavour to describe things as they are. A little spiritual insight, then, into the human heart may explain the reason why this severe discipline is needful, and unravel this mystery. Together with the spiritual graces that had first budded, and afterwards, under the warm beams of the sun, burst forth into flower, there had shot unperceived an undergrowth of self-righteousness and spiritual pride.

Counterfeits, too, and imitations of divine operations had sprung up, as the offspring of a deceitful heart, or as delusions of Satan transformed into an angel of light. Side by side with spiritual trust, fleshly presumption had imperceptibly crept up. Under the shadow of divine hope, vain confidence had put forth its rank shoots. Natural belief had grown rapidly up with spiritual faith, fleshly ardour with heavenly zeal, universal charity with divine love, and the knowledge that puffeth up the head with the grace that humbleth the heart. Above all things, pride, "accursed pride, that spirit by God abhorred", was taking occasion by the very grace of God to feed itself to the full. It was sitting on Christ's throne, exalting itself and despising others, measuring every one by its own standard, and will nigh trampling under its feet every one of David's soldiers that was in distress, in debt, or discontented 1Sa 22:2. Forgetting its base original, when it was a beggar on the dunghill, and that a man can receive nothing except it be given him from heaven, the soul was in great hazard of sacrificing to its own net, and burning incense to its own drag Hab 1:16. Thus pride was doing that secret work which Hart so well describes;

The heart uplifts with God's own gifts,

And makes even grace a snare. Gadsby's 287

But beside these more obvious and glaring evils, we may remark that self was as yet little known, the deep recesses of a desperately wicked heart little fathomed, the helplessness, beggary and bankruptcy of the creature little felt. The unspeakable value, therefore, of Christ's blood, the breadths, lengths, depths and heights of distinguishing love, the riches of the goodness, forbearance and longsuffering of God, the depths of misery and degradation to which the Redeemer stooped to pluck His chosen from death and hell—all these divine mysteries, in the experience of which the very marrow of vital godliness consists, were little known and less prized.

Judging from my own experience, I believe there is at this time an indistinctness, a dimness, a haziness in the views we have of Christ. Though the soul loves and cleaves to Him with purpose of heart, yet it does not see nor feel the depth of the malady, and therefore not the height of the remedy. It has not yet been plunged into the ditch, till its own clothes abhor it Job 9:31, nor cast into "deep mire where there is no standing" Ps 69:2. The fountains of the great deep of the human heart have not yet been broken up; the exceeding sinfulness of sin has not yet been fully manifested; the desperate enmity and rebellion of a fallen nature have not yet been thoroughly discovered; nor the wounds, bruises and putrefying sores of inward corruption been experimentally laid bare. And thus, as the knowledge of salvation can only keep pace with the knowledge of sin, Christ is as yet but half a Saviour.

A lesson, therefore, is to be taught which the soul can learn in no other way. Books here are useless, Christian friends of little value, ministers ineffectual, and the letter of the Word insufficient. A certain experience must be wrought in the soul, a peculiar knowledge be communicated, a particular secret be revealed, and all this must be done in a way for which no other can be substituted. This, then, is the reason why winter comes afore harvest, and why "the sprigs are cut off with pruning hooks, and the

branches taken and cut down."

The discipline thus exercised by the heavenly Husbandman consists of two distinct parts;

1. The first is that which is immediately and peculiarly exercised by Himself: "He will cut off the sprigs with pruning hooks, and take away and cut down the branches."

2. The second is that which He leaves to be accomplished by other agents. "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."

I remarked that there had shot up a secret undergrowth of natural religion, as well as a plentiful crop of pride, during the spring and summer of the soul. These are the sprigs that had grown up side by side with the bud. Now if these were suffered to continue, they would starve the bud, or overshadow it. A shoot from the old stock, if permitted to remain, will always starve the graft. It is a sucker, so called because it sucks the sap and nourishment from it, and lives and thrives at its expense. A good gardener, therefore, never hesitates for a moment, but takes out his pruning knife and cut it off close to the stem.

But it may be said, "How will this comparison hold good in the kingdom of grace? The old man and the new are not maintained and nourished by the same sap." It is true that originally they are not, but when grace visits the heart, nature will often adopt new food and take grace's provision. Old nature is not very delicate nor dainty, but will feed on anything that suits her palate or satisfies her ravenous appetite. Sin or self-righteousness, indulgences or austerity, feasting or fasting, truth or error, religion or profaneness, superstition or infidelity, a convent or a brothel, all are alike to nature. She has the appetite of a vulture, and the digestion of an ostrich. She has as many colours as a chameleon, and as "changeable suits of apparel" as an actor's wardrobe. She can play all parts, speak all languages, and assume all shapes. But all her crafts and wiles she employs for one single end -to feed and exalt herself. This is the utmost stretch of her grovelling ambition, and to effect the will compass sea and land, heaven and hell.

Thus when grace comes into the heart, nature first resists and quarrels with the newcomer, who is destined to rise upon her ruins, and set up his throne on her prostrate body. But as opposition only makes grace wax stronger and stronger, nature soon changes her tone, and seeks to ruin him by her friendship, whom she cannot conquer by her enmity. She becomes religious, and puts in her claim for some of grace's food. If grace prays, she can pray also; if grace reads, she too can turn over the Bible; and if grace hears, she can sit under a gospel minister. Nay, she can go far beyond grace, for she has no conscience and he has, and can talk when grace is forced to hold his tongue, and get into a pulpit when can hardly sit in the pew. So the six hundred thousand who fell in the wilderness ate angels' food to the full. Ps 78:25 So Saul was feasted on the shoulder, the choice piece that was reserved especially for the priest 1Sa 9:24 Le 8:32 . Thus nature, become religious, feeds on the provision bestowed upon grace. And this she does so slyly and secretly, that unsuspecting, guileless grace never discover the robbery. Here, then steps in the heavenly Husbandman, and begins to cut off with His pruning hook the sprigs that are pushing forth so luxuriantly at grace's expense.

In using His pruning hook, the divine Husbandman has two objects in view;

1. To cut off close to the stem the rank shoots of nature.

2. To cut down to their due proportion-their bearing length, the scions of grace. Now natural faith, false hope, and counterfeit love are utterly unable to stand against heavy trials when they are sent for the express purpose of putting us into the balance. They give way and fall to pieces. They vanish away like the chaff that is driven with the whirlwind out of the floor, and as the smoke out of the chimney. It is as Bildad speaks of a hypocrite's hope; "He shall lean upon his house, but it shall not stand; he shall hold it fast, but it shall not endure" Job 8:15. And as this sharp pruning hook lops off false religion close to the stem, so it cuts down a good part of that which is true.

It is true that real grace can suffer neither loss nor diminution, but its manifestations and its actings may. Who that possesses faith is not conscious that it ebbs and flows, rises and sinks, is strong and weak, and varies from day to day and from hour to hour? Thus when a sharp trial comes, its immediate effect is to depress faith. It falls upon it like a weight, and bends it down to the ground. Faith may be compared to the quicksilver in a weather-glass or in a thermometer. The quantity of mercury in the bulb never varies, but it rises or falls in the tube according to the weight of the air, or the heat of the day. Thus faith, though it abides in the heart without loss or diminution, yet rises or sinks in the feelings, as the weather is fair or foul, or as the sun shows or hides itself.

Did Job's faith, for instance, mount equally high when "in the days of his youth" -the spring of his soul-"the secret of God was upon his tabernacle," and when "he cursed his day," and cried, "Oh that I knew where I might find Him?" Was Peter's faith as strong when he quailed before a servant girl as when he was ready to go to prison and death? Or Abraham's when he denied Sarah to be his wife Ge 20:2, and when with but 318 he pursued and smote the army of four mighty kings? Ge 14. If faith never fluctuated, never sinks and never rises, then we have at once the dead assurance of a professor; the faith is in our own keeping; then it does not hang on the smile or frown of God; then we are no more beggars and bankrupts, living on supplies given or withholden, but independent and self-sufficient; then we "have no changes, and so fear not God." But if faith ebb and flow, what is the cause? Is it in self? Can we add to its stature one cubit, or make one hair of it black or white? If not, then must its ebbings and flowings come from God.

But temporal afflictions do not cut down faith, hope and love, nor cut off their counterfeits so severely and closely as spiritual trials. We read of "pruning hooks," which expression denotes more than one. Thus any discovery of the holiness and justice of God, of His terrible wrath against sin and eternal hatred of all iniquity, any piercing conviction of His heart-searching eye flashing into the conscience, any setting our secret sins in the light of His countenance, any spiritual sight of self in appalling contrast with His purity and perfection-any manifestations of this nature will most assuredly cut down to the stump the sprigs of natural religion.

Fallen nature could never yet endure the sight of God. It perishes at the rebuke of His countenance. It goes into the holes of the rocks and the caves of the earth, for fear of the Lord, and for the glory of His majesty. Natural faith never yet bore the touch of God's hand, but crumbled to pieces under it. Thus the first effect of these spiritual discoveries of God is to mow to the ground the thick under-growth of nature. And as the same stroke sweeps away all the consolation which the soul enjoyed, the feeling is as if it had lost all its religion. Like a person going out of the sun into a dark room, to whom the darkness seem greater than it really is; or like a person to whom a bad piece of news is told, who is so stunned by it that he can think of no one alleviating circumstance; so when darkness suddenly falls upon the soul, and evil tidings from heaven seem communicated to the heart, not only nature totally, but grace, too, partially sinks under the stroke. As a person who swoons away retains life in reality, though it is lost in appearance, so grace faints away under trials, and often recovers but slowly her former strength.

Such is the usual effect of sudden and severe trials. But there is another mode of using the pruning hook employed by the divine Husbandman. And that is, if I may use the figure, to cut half through the branch, and so stop the supply of sap. Many who have enjoyed the spring and summer of the soul, have felt their comfort and peace decline gradually, they could scarce tell how. It was no sudden stroke that befell them, but a gradual withdrawing of light and life, and a gradual discovery of the character of God and of their own vileness. Thus the pruning hook was so slowly and insensibly put under the lower side of the branch to cut it half-way through, that it was not seen.

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