

# Understanding Spiritual Growth

by Charles Leiter

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*The sermon emphasizes the interplay between human responsibility and God's divine work in the process of spiritual growth.*

**Duration:** 43:57

**Scripture:** Ezekiel 36:26-27, John 15:5, Philippians 2:12, Colossians 1:6, Revelation 14:15-16

**Topics:** "Spiritual Growth", "Gods Sovereignty"

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## Description

This sermon delves into the concept of growth in the Kingdom of God, emphasizing the partnership between human responsibility and God's supernatural work within believers. It explores the process of growth as a gradual, mysterious, and miraculous journey orchestrated by God, leading to a certain outcome of harvest time where every true believer will be gathered. The sermon highlights the necessity of patience, trust in God's work, and the assurance of a bountiful harvest in the end.

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## Transcript

Well, Paul says in Philippians 2, work out your salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God who works in you both to will and to work or to do of His good pleasure. And so on the one hand, he says to us, work out our salvation.

On the other hand, he says, God is working in you to cause you to want to do what's right and to enable you to do what's right. So which is it? Is it man's responsibility or is it God working in us? And it's both, isn't it? And it's not like a yoke of oxen where you do your part and God does His part like this. But it's more like two cups that one fits inside the other one.

And God is the One moving everything forward, but He does it through our willing and doing what He's worked in us to will and do. So we've heard this morning a little bit of exhortation about the necessity for us to work out our salvation. And beloved, if you don't spend time in the Word and you don't spend time in prayer and you don't spend time with the people of God, you're not going to make it.

But on the other hand, God is the One that works in us to cause us to want to open that Bible and to actually get it open. And so we're going to get both barrels today, I trust. The first one is exhortations of our responsibility.

We're going to look at this morning as a parable of the Lord Jesus where He emphasizes what's going on behind the scenes. And so let's turn to Mark 4. And we'll read four verses. Mark 4, verse 26.

And He was saying, the Kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the ground. Now, He's going to tell us something, a fact about spiritual reality of what the Kingdom is like. The Kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the ground and goes to bed at night and gets up by day and the seed sprouts up and grows.

How? He Himself does not know. The earth produces crops by itself. First the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head.

But when the crop permits, He immediately puts in the sickle because the harvest has come. If you're a Christian here this morning, you already realize that the greatest Teacher who ever lived was the Lord Jesus Christ. His emphasis was never lopsided.

He never had a bump on the tire. Everything that He said, His manner, His methods were always perfect. It says in John 3 that He whom God has sent speaks the very words of God.

For He gives the Spirit without measure unto Him. So everything perfect. Every response, every emphasis, every manner, every method.

And one of His favorite methods was the parable. There's a special beauty and special wonder about these parables, isn't there? They're so earthy. I mean, seeds and farmers and what have you.

And they're so heavenly. In four verses, the Lord Jesus can say more than all the wise men of the ages. And He often opened His mouth in parables.

We read here a little later in verses 33 and 34, with many such parables, He was speaking the Word to them as they were able to hear it. And He was not speaking to them without parables. He was explaining everything privately to His own disciples.

And in Matthew, we're told that one of the Psalms alluded to this about the Messiah. It says, I will open my mouth in parables. I will utter things hidden from the foundation of the world.

And so the Lord Jesus Christ was speaking in these parables things that nobody had ever heard that had never been said since the foundation of the world. He said, blessed are your ears to hear such words as we've just read, because many prophets and righteous men, even kings, desired to hear the things that you hear. They didn't get to hear them.

What a privilege we have to be able to even study this parable. He's telling us some things about the nature of the kingdom. Very different than the ideas that the Jews had at that time about the nature of the kingdom.

And many of those parables are of that sort. But today we want to look at this parable in Mark 4. And what a wonderful parable it is. And how thankful we should be for the truth that it contains.

Before we begin, I just want to remind you again that these parables are speaking truth about invisible reality. They're telling us something about the nature of things in the kingdom. And so the Lord Jesus said, now there's a realm here that you can't see, that you can't understand.

But I want to tell you something about it. This is what it's like. The kingdom of God is like this.

It's like a man who casts seed on the ground and goes to bed at night and gets up by day. Out of all the Gospels, only found here in Mark, it's kind of a buried treasure. You come upon, you stumble upon it in the field as you're going through the Gospel of Mark.

So the first question we should ask is what is the theme or overall subject of this parable? Before we get to the details, you say, what's He talking about here? I think the answer is He's talking about growth. Verse 27, He goes to bed at night, gets up by day, the seed sprouts up and grows. Verse 28, the earth produces crops by itself.

First the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head. So, we know right off, the Lord is unfolding to us some of the mysteries about growth in the kingdom. Growth of the kingdom of God as a whole down through church history.

He said this is the way it's going to be. And growth in our individual lives and in the lives of other Christians. This is the reality.

He says this is the way it happens. So, with that in mind, let's look at the details. First of all, verse 26, He was saying the kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the ground.

So the first thing is the prerequisite of growth, which is planting. You can't have a crop. You can't have growth without planting.

And that is a big emphasis, you remember, in the parables. It comes up again and again. You have a man sowing seed.

And you have that picture, that illustration, where the seed is the Word of God. And then you have this man who plants good seed in the field. And these plants come up.

It has to do with God Himself planting. Ultimately, the man is God. Represents God.

And God is the one that plants the seed in the ground of the Christian. You remember what Jesus said? Every plant that My heavenly Father has not planted shall be rooted up. Isn't this a wonderful thing to think that God is in the business of planting good seed that springs up and becomes a wheat harvest? God does that.

So the seeds are men sown by God. Converts. But then if you go back a little further, Jesus uses this matter of the seed being the Word of God.

And you have that aspect of it, which has to do with, of course, this is the way God does save people. He plants people and saves people through us sowing the seed of the Word of God. And so both of these, I think, are involved here when He talks about growth in the kingdom.

Remember Paul in 1 Corinthians 3, he says, I plant it. I plant it. So God uses men to plant the seed of the Word and uses that seed to save people and plant true converts.

So do we see ourselves as sowers planting seed? We have seed. We've been given the seed. And isn't this something? The seed looks so insignificant.

Vance Havner said that when he was young, he used to... I don't know, do they still do this? You get your garden seeds in a little package and it has a beautiful picture on there. And you know, it's a promise of what could be. But you look inside.

I mean, lettuce is really the one. When you look inside, it looks like you're planting pepper in the ground. It's like, how can this possibly bring forth a crop? Well, you think of Paul standing on Mars Hill among the scoffers.

And this is what we are. We're in a heathen society that hates the Word. And it looks like those seeds are so small.

And there's a step of faith involved in that. In just planting that seed. The promise of what can be is on the cover, but it requires a step of faith.

The giant sunflowers, you know, that have those, it's almost like a tree that starts out from one seed. And so are we sowing? Brother Kurt Daniel, a pastor there in Illinois, you call his number. If you don't get him, you get the answering machine.

And at the end, he'll say, and remember the words of the Lord Jesus. And then he quotes the verse of Scripture. What's that? Planting a seed.

Well, that won't do any good. Well, God says the opposite, doesn't He? Ecclesiastes 11, verse 4-6, He who watches the wind will not sow, and he who looks at the clouds will not reap. Just as you do not know the path of the wind and how bones are formed in the womb of the pregnant woman, so you do not know the activity of God who makes all things.

Sow your seed in the morning and do not be idle in the evening, for you do not know whether morning or evening sowing will succeed or whether both of them alike will be good. Now, the devil tells you the opposite, doesn't he? You don't know. Nothing will happen in the morning.

You don't even know nothing will happen in either one of them. God says just the other way around. He says sow it in the morning, sow it in the evening.

You don't know what I might do. I might do something with both of them. And it's happened, hasn't it, again and again in the most unlikely cases where God has taken some seed through the instrumentality of man planting some little insignificant seed.

God has planted a real, true Christian. And lo and behold, they spring up out of dry ground and they're sustained by God. So the prerequisite of growth is planting.

That has to be. God has to plant the person and He does it through the instrumentality of us planting the seed. Secondly, what else is true about the Kingdom of God? Are you listening to this? There is a time element involved.

There is a process involved. He goes to bed at night. He gets up by day.

He goes to bed at night. He gets up by day. What's Jesus saying? He's saying there's a time element involved in this matter of growth.

One of the things that a farmer has to have is patience. And actually, as I see the weather patterns and what have you, I think, well, I really don't want to be a farmer. Think of it.

James specifically brings this out. Be patient therefore, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. Behold, a farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil being patient about it until it gets the early and late rains.

You too be patient. Strengthen your hearts for the coming of the Lord is at hand. We don't like to think in these terms, but the Lord is telling us something here, isn't He? You picture a farmer sitting dejectedly on his tractor at the end of the day, and you say, what's wrong? He says, I don't have any crop.

When did you plant? This morning. It's absurd, isn't it? It's exactly the way we are. Instant.

I've read my Bible every day this week, and I don't see any growth. You know? In the area of witnessing, in the area of Bible study, in the area of prayer, this instant mentality. Miles Stanford said, when God wants to make a squash, He takes just a short time.

But when He wants to make an oak tree, it might take a hundred years. There's a time element involved. Prime Minister Disraeli, there in England at one point, the story is that he stood up and gave an extemporaneous speech.

And later in the day, they were having some kind of state function, and one of the ladies of state came up to him. She said, I want to tell you how much I enjoyed that extemporaneous speech. He said, it's been on my mind all day.

He said, madam, that speech has been on my mind for 20 years. That's the time element. You hear one of these brothers get up and give an extemporaneous word? That's been there a long time.

That didn't just happen. It takes time. God works gradually.

There's a time element involved with true growth. Let me say it another way. Growth is imperceptible.

Another way of saying it. Growth is imperceptible. You think of corn plants.

Just sit. Go out in the field. I don't know.

You all don't have much corn down here, but you go out and look at a corn plant and just stare at it really hard. Keep an eye on it. Watch it grow.

You won't see anything whatsoever. You look at your own life really hard. Stare at it really hard to detect a trace of growth.

You're not going to see anything. Isn't that encouraging? You parents, you know this morning, your kids walked into the room and said, wow, how you've grown during the night. No.

But somebody that hasn't seen them for a while, they come in and it's amazing. And we forget. And the quickest way to get discouraged is to look inside all the time and keep a real good eye on yourself and see whether you're growing.

We forget how different people are now from what they were ten years ago. And growth is like that. It's imperceptible.

It's slow. It's mysteriously slow. There's an apparent slowness about it.

What else does Jesus tell us? Well, He talks about the mystery of growth in v. 27. He goes to bed at night, gets up by day. There's this time element.

Time element. My mother used to say that she thought she could hear corn growing in the night. I don't think so.

I think she could hear the leaves rustling. There's the time element. But then He says, the seed sprouts up and grows.

How? He Himself does not know. There's a mystery. Jesus said, now listen to this.

Jesus said this is the way the Kingdom of Heaven is. You do not know how growth takes place. That's the way it is.

You don't know how it takes place. That's what He's already said. It's mysterious.

The Gospel takes root in your life and in others' lives. And you see things happen that you cannot figure out. It fills you with amazement and wonder.

And you're not going to have the slightest idea how Jesus said the wind blows where it wishes. You hear the sound of it. You don't know where it comes from or where it's going.

So is everyone who's born of the Spirit. I've never understood growth in myself or in anyone else. We know, like we've heard this morning, we know it has to do, depending on time and the Word, it has to do with prayer.

It has to do with fellowship. All those things are the context. So how many of you have just decided, now I'm going to read my Bible every day this week.

How'd you do on that? See what I'm saying? Underneath it all, there's a mysterious working of the power of God. Underneath sustaining everything. Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for God is working inside of you, supernaturally, or you're not going to make it.

You're not going to make it. But He is working inside of you if you're a Christian, and you are going to make it. See? It's mysterious.

I've never understood growth in myself or anybody else. If it's something where you can say, I did this, and I did this, and I did this, you've probably got some kind of pharisaical counterfeit is what you've got. I've never liked how to... There's books out on that.

How to win souls. How to have church growth. The Lord Jesus said right here, there's no how-to.

He said you don't know how. That just did away with a bunch of conferences. You don't need to waste your time.

I've seen people taking notes on how-to. Fill up 20 pages. A year later, they're coming back to the same conference, filling up 20 more pages.

Nothing ever changes. You've got to be cast upon God. Like Brother Merle used to say, the Bible's not a how-to book, it's a what-to book.

A lot of the stuff Nathan was saying to us today, that's what-to, you know? You be strong. You be stable. How in the world am I going to do that? Well, you've got to go to God.

True growth. Usually what happens in true growth is you're crying out to God for change. You've tried this.

You've tried that. You've gone to this conference. You've gone to that conference.

You've tried squinting your eyes harder when you repented. And none of it worked. And then, lo and behold, you look back and it's God has changed me.

He set me free from this. He's working in my life. Isn't that wonderful? He says it happens.

It happens. How? You don't know. I don't know how this happened.

But I know, yes, yes, I had to spend time in the Word. Yes, I had to cry out to God. Yes, on all that.

But in the end, you look back. You know, I used to think that victory over sin would be I'd be standing there like these hunters in Africa, you know, with my rifle and my foot on the head of the lion. This is Charles with victory over sin.

It's more like you're shaking your head and saying I can't figure out how in the world God ever set me free from that. But it sure is good to be free from that. And now I see how bad it was.

I couldn't even see how bad it was before. Isn't that true? Oh, it's mysterious. The mistake that people make is to take their own experiences and try to get a formula that you can give to everybody else and if they do that, it'll work.

It won't. God uses things in one person's life and the next person reads that same book or whatever, they don't get a thing out of it. He does not want it.

You know, you remember with the ark. They said, well, take that. It will work for us.

No, it won't. Well, what else does He teach us? Growth is miraculous. Verse 28.

The earth produces crops by itself. Presto! You know, they just pop out of it. That's what Jesus said.

In other words, He's saying there's something supernatural about this. You can't explain this on your own. The earth produces crops by itself.

It's beyond man's power totally. And it's incredible how it happens. There's a power there outside of us.

And we don't know. We're not the one that grows the seed. God is the one that does that.

All we do is put the seed into the ground. And so there's a miraculous aspect about growth. There's power and vitality in the seed itself.

Peter talks about being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible by the Word of God that lives and abides forever. Romans 1.16 I'm not ashamed of the Gospel. It's the power of God unto salvation.

1 Thessalonians 2.13 The Word of God which performs its work in you who believe. And I like that where Paul says in Acts 20, he says I commend you to God. We've done this often with people leaving the church, going back to China or wherever.

I commend you to God and to the Word of His grace which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance. It's just wonderful, isn't it? There's life in the seed itself. The very idea of seed, it's the Greek word semen.

1 John, God's seed remains in him. So there's something miraculous about the seed, but there's something miraculous also about the earth. The earth brings forth fruit of itself.

Isaiah 61 says this, I will rejoice greatly in the Lord. My soul will exult in my God, for He has clothed me with garments of salvation. He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness.

As a bridegroom decks himself with a garland. And as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its sprouts, and as a garden causes the things sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God..." Now, He's the garden here, see? "...a garden causes the things sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations." Now that's what we're talking about here.

He says what Jesus is saying is God is at work underneath the surface to make things spring up supernaturally that could not otherwise happen. You remember in 1 Corinthians 3, what then is Apollos? What is Paul? "...Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one. I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth." You know, you think about it, what are you really doing when you put a seed in the ground? You're not doing anything.

God is the One making that germinate and grow. Are you listening to me? God causes growth. The only way you're ever going to grow is if God causes you to grow.

That's the only way. The only way you're ever going to change. The only way you're ever going to be more Christ-like is if God causes you to become more Christ-like.

And that's what He's promised to do. That's what He's promised to do in you. What a glorious thing.

The only hope anybody has. None of us will ever rise any higher than God lifts us by His grace. You're not going to do it.

But He will do it. He will do it. The Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all nations.

That's the only hope we have. God working in us to will and do of His good pleasure causing growth. He causes you to will.

He gives you that desire. And then it's a long ways from the time you start thinking, I want to be more holy and this or that. It's a long ways before you're actually there.

He works in you both to will and to work for His good pleasure. So if our Christianity can be explained by human psychology or turning over a new leaf or trying to be better and so on, there's no miracle. There's no outside power, then you're not a Christian.

What an encouragement. This is God's work. And He will accomplish what concerns us.

All right, number five. The progressiveness of growth. You see it in 27? It sprouts up.

First of all, it has to sprout up and it grows. Verse 28, first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head. Progressiveness, that's simple, isn't it? This and then this and then this.

We don't want that. What we want is go from here over there. Jump past it.

You know, you could have such and such experience. That puts you clear over here. You could enter into entire sanctification.

Just have this happen. Skip over all that stuff. It's kind of hard going through all that stuff anyway.

A lot of teaching is like that. Anything that is held out to you that makes you think, if I could just have such and such, I could skip over these stages, that's a false teaching. And it's not.

And you may have people say that they've entered, and they have. There's been some special thing happen in their life where they're in a different plane, a higher plane than they were before. That happens.

But beloved, I guarantee this, they're still going through the stages just like you are. First the blade, then the head, then the mature grain. That's always the way it is.

You see somebody that's entirely sanctified, you're looking at Jesus. And He's the only one until heaven. The holiest man in the world today has so much sin, he'd be in hell.

I mean, in an hour, he'd be in hell. We're falling. Can you imagine the way Jesus handled a towel? There's nobody in the world that could hold a towel the way Jesus did and wash somebody's feet.

You can't begin to be like Him in that sense. But we can walk in His steps. Growth is progressive.

And you see here the utter stupidity of the professing church in this. There's some former football player or singer or whatever. They get converted and two weeks later, they're speaking to a crowd of 1,000 people or 10,000, more like 20,000 people.

Take some little immature plant at best and stick them out there. That's not the way it is. That's folly.

There's a process involved. Hudson Taylor, before he became the head of the China and England Mission, had to spend years in obscurity as a nobody learning things from God. And I like that two-volume set on the life of Hudson Taylor.

Volume 1, The Growth of a Soul. Volume 2, The Growth of a Work of God. Back when I was, this tells my age, but back when I was young, we always talked about the Empire State Building.

Well, this is the tallest building in the world and all this stuff. Well, anyway, they said it took as long to put that foundation in and there's as much in the foundation as there is in the rest of the building. Picture building some of these massive things that they've got now on a five-foot foundation.

How long would that last? There's a, I think it's the Washington Cathedral I saw years ago with my mother. And in one way, it's impressive looking at those top spires and everything up there. But to me, the most impressive thing was when they took us down into the basement and they said, now this rounded wall

here is part of one of the pillars that supports this building.

And you could barely see the curve in it. It was so big. Any life that is real has as much underground or more underground than there is above the surface.

It's always that way. And if it's not, the things that you think, I want to be, you know, you're looking up there at those spires of the building when God is driving foundation piling in your life that is much harder, hard stuff that you've got to learn. I was talking about the hymn the other night, or maybe it was last night we were talking.

I like that hymn. I think old Vance Havner quoted it. Many a rapturous minstrel among the sons of light will save as sweet as music.

I learned it in the night. And many a rolling anthem that fills the Father's throne sobbed at its first rehearsal in the shroud of a darkened room. That's God driving the foundation, putting the foundation down under the building.

There is a slowness involved. There is a process involved. Don't let anybody trick you into the idea that you can jump from here to here.

You're not going to shortchange anything. You're not going to. You say, well, I'm going to memorize the whole New Testament.

Well, that's great. But it's not going to make you a spiritual child. I mean, God has to do its stages.

Well, the progressiveness of growth then. The certainty of growth. Now remember, the Lord is describing the way things are in the Kingdom.

It's like a man who plants seed in the ground and he goes to bed at night. This comes up. It grows.

It grows. It grows. And then it dies and withers.

That's not what He says. That's not the way it is when God is involved in this. It is going to make it.

It's certain. It's going to grow. When men plant things, they often die.

Not so with God. And you can look at that in relation to church history as a whole. That little seed that was planted at the beginning, it becomes a great tree.

And God's not going to fail. The church is not going to fail. He's advancing His Kingdom.

He's going to do it. He will do it. It will bring forth a crop.

It will grow. It's a certainty. Colossians.

Paul talks about this. He said, you previously heard in the Word of Truth the Gospel which has come to you just as in all the world also. It's constantly bearing fruit and increasing even as it has been doing in you also since the day you heard of it and understood the grace of God and truth.

So growth is certain. The church isn't going to fail. And growth is also certain in the life of every true believer.

Why? Because it's not dependent upon man. Being confident of this very thing that He who began a good work and you God did it, will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ. We're confident of that.

He's the One. He'll do it. But, God says in the New Covenant there in Ezekiel 36, I will cleanse you of all your filthiness and all your idols.

I will put My Spirit in you and cause you to walk in My statutes. I'm so thankful. He's saying I'm not going to quit on you.

You may fight this. You either fight it or embrace it, but if you fight it, eventually you're going to embrace it if you're a child of God. I will cleanse you.

I'll cause you to walk. It's a hard way though sometimes if we resist what God's doing in our lives. Jesus said, blessed is everyone who has.

To him more shall be given. And he shall have an abundance. And that's a wonderful thing.

If you have anything that's real, it'd be better to be the weakest Christian in the world today. If you have just a little grain that's real, because you're going to get more. And eventually, you're going to have a lot.

Isn't that wonderful? This little tiny thing of grace in the life of a true Christian. He says, blessed are you. Now him that does not have even what he thinks he has shall be taken away.

Better to be the weakest Christian in the world than the strongest looking false professor. Every branch in me that bears fruit, he purges it, he cleanses it that it might bring forth more fruit. There's the process.

More fruit. Herein is my Father glorified that you bear much fruit. So prove to be my disciples.

Some 60. Some 100. Some 60.

Some 30. But all have fruit. They're all growing.

They're all producing fruit. Alright, last point. Final outcome of growth is harvest time.

And he tells us that here. Verse 29, when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle because the harvest has come. Why do you plant seeds? You plant them in order to get a harvest.

God is going to have a harvest, beloved. He's going to have a harvest. There's not going to be one missing.

Think of this. Jesus says, every one that the Father has given Me will come to Me. And he that comes to Me, I will certainly not cast out.

Why not? Why won't He cast us out? Well, because He says I came down from Heaven to accomplish a specific purpose. I came down from Heaven not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. And this is the will of Him who sent Me.

That of all that He has given Me, I lose only a few, and then I raise up the rest at the last day. No, that's not what He said, is it? That of all that He has given Me, I lose not one. Think of this.

Every plant that my Heavenly Father has not planted shall be rooted up. But every plant that my Heavenly Father plants is going to make it all the way to the harvest. And there is a day coming, I think of it whenever we're together like this, do you realize the hilarious joy we're going to have in seeing one another in Heaven? What a day of rejoicing! Why? Because it's the rejoicing of harvest.

The crop's in. You know, up until that time, you're kind of gritting your teeth, saying I don't know if so-and-so's going to make it or not. I hope they're real.

And oh, there they are. You see them there? They're shining like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father. What a day of rejoicing that will be when the harvest is in.

And we'll look back and it'll be 10,000 times more wonderful than we ever thought as we see the providence of God and keeping His people and so on. There is a harvest coming. And it's going to be a great gathering and a time of rejoicing.

Another angel came out of the temple crying out with a loud voice to Him who sat on the cloud, put in your sickle and reap, because the hour to reap has come. Because the harvest of the earth is ripe. And He who sat on the cloud, capital H, He who sat on the cloud, swung a sickle over the earth and the earth was reaped.

Jesus is telling us the nature of the Kingdom of God. And He's taking us back behind the scenes and showing us how growth takes place. It takes place supernaturally by the power of God.

And He will not have a crop failure. But He's going to take every one of us through all the stages necessary to get there. Amen.

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Video: [https://sermonindex2.b-cdn.net/CCZB\\_VYOJNk.mp4](https://sermonindex2.b-cdn.net/CCZB_VYOJNk.mp4)

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