

Following on to Know the Lord

by J.C. Philpot

The sermon emphasizes the importance of following on to know the Lord, despite the obstacles and difficulties that may arise, and the result of this pursuit is a deeper and more intimate knowledge of Him.

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Repentance"

Description

J.C. Philpot preaches about the journey of a soul in knowing the Lord, emphasizing the need to follow on despite difficulties and trials, and the assurance that God's timing and presence are certain. The sermon delves into the spiritual meaning of Hosea 6:3, highlighting the experience of Ephraim as a representation of a quickened vessel of mercy struggling with false coverings and props, leading to a deep conviction of sin and a turning to the Lord. Philpot explains the significance of God's dealings with Ephraim, comparing them to a moth eating away at false coverings and a lion tearing away false hopes, ultimately leading to a humbled and repentant heart that seeks the Lord. The sermon concludes with a hopeful outlook on the Lord's appointed time to come as the morning and the latter and former rain, bringing spiritual growth and revival to the soul.

Transcript

Preached at Allington, September 19, 1841, by J. C Philpot.

"Then shall we know, if we follow on to know the Lord--His going forth is prepared as the morning; and He shall come unto us as the rain, as the latter and former rain unto the earth." (Hosea 6:3)

Before I enter into the spiritual meaning of these words it will be necessary to see the connection of the passage with what precedes it. There is no more fruitful parent of error than to take detached portions of God's Word, separated from their connection. Only so far as light is cast upon the Word of God by the blessed Spirit, and we in that light see its spiritual meaning, are we able to arrive at any right understanding of it; but that meaning will not be one distorted from the connection, nor one wrested from the place that it occupies, as a link torn from a complete chain, but will, for the most part, be in harmony with the context.

The words of the text are the language of Ephraim; but they are the language of Ephraim 'under particular circumstances, and as passing through a particular experience'. They are not a promise thrown down for anybody to pick up; they are not words to be taken at random into everybody's lips. Nor are they a promise addressed generally to the Church of God; but they set forth an experience of a peculiar nature; and

therefore only so far as we have some acquaintance with that experience are the words suitable to us.

We will, then, with God's blessing, look back a little at this and the preceding chapter (for they are both closely connected), and endeavor, with God's help, to trace out what was the experience of Ephraim at the time that he uttered these words; and then we shall perhaps more clearly see the difference between the language of faith and the language of presumption.

1. In the twelfth verse of the preceding chapter, the Lord says--"Therefore will I be unto Ephraim as a moth, and to the house of Judah as rottenness." This casts a light on the dealings of God with Ephraim. Ephraim had wrapped himself up in a robe; he had covered himself with a garment, but not of God's Spirit. Now the Lord threatens that He "will be unto Ephraim as a moth." That is, He will fret this garment; He will (to use a familiar expression) make holes in it; it shall not be a complete garment to cover him, but it shall be moth-eaten and rotten, so that, dropping to pieces bit by bit, it could neither cover his nakedness nor shield him from God's all-searching eye. We find the Psalmist, in (Psalm 39:11), making use of the same figure, and a very striking one it is. "When You correct man for iniquity with rebukes, You make his beauty to consume away like a moth," or as it is in the old version, preserved in the Common Prayer Book, "like as it were a moth fretting a garment."

These words then show us just where Ephraim was in soul experience. Ephraim does not represent one destitute of spiritual light and life, but a quickened vessel of mercy, and yet one who, for lack of the moth and the rottenness, was wrapping himself up in a garment, not of God's giving, nor of the Spirit's application, that is, not the glorious robe of Christ's imputed righteousness cast around him by the Spirit of God.

Now I firmly believe that there are many people who have the fear of God in their hearts who are wrapping themselves up in a covering which is not of God's Spirit, and therefore, as the prophet speaks, "add sin to sin" (Isaiah 30:1). Not having been led into a deep acquaintance with the spirituality of God's law, not having had all their refuges of lies broken up, they wrap themselves up in a covering which is not of God's Spirit; and they fancy that this garment in which they are wrapped up is the robe of Christ's imputed righteousness, merely because they believe in the doctrine of Christ's righteousness. But that cutting expression, "a covering, but not of My Spirit," shows that there is something more to be known than the bare doctrine of Christ's righteousness, and that the very doctrine itself becomes a lying refuge, when the 'mere letter of truth' is sheltered in, and the Holy Spirit does not experimentally make it known to the soul.

The Lord, then, seeing precisely where Ephraim was, says, "I will be unto Ephraim as a moth, and to the house of Judah as rottenness." That is, just in the same way as when a man takes out of his chest or wardrobe a garment which he has laid up there perhaps for months, and when he holds this garment up to the light he finds that the moth has been there, has laid its eggs and fretted it, made holes in it, and absolutely spoiled it; so Ephraim, after having laid up his garment in his wardrobe, the Bible, and with great inward satisfaction having often looked upon it, when the hour of temptation and distress comes, and he would bring out this robe to wear, finds it all rent and torn, fretted and spoiled. The rents in Ephraim's covering were not seen until it was brought out to the light; but when beheld in the light of God's countenance, the moth-holes were visible, and it was found to be all dropping to pieces.

2. "And to the house of Judah as rottenness." That is, when Judah comes to put a strain upon the prop on which he leans, it breaks. That is the idea of rottenness. The old cable will do very well until there is a strain put upon it--but then, if it is rotten, it breaks asunder, and the vessel falls upon the rocks. Thus the

Lord says, "I will be to Judah as rottenness;" not "rottenness;" that cannot be, for that would imply corruption; but, "I will do the same thing spiritually that rottenness is naturally. I will make all his props to be to him as rotten; I will so spoil them in his experience, that, as Bildad speaks (Job 8:15), he shall lean upon his house, but it shall not stand; he shall hold it fast, but it shall not endure."

3. But what is the effect of "the moth" and the "rottenness?" Will it at once cure Ephraim of his idolatries, and turn him to the stronghold as a prisoner of hope? No; not yet. "When Ephraim saw his sickness, and Judah saw his wound, then went Ephraim to the Assyrian, and sent to king Jareb--yet could he not heal you, nor cure you of your wound." Ephraim will not then turn to the Lord. No; He is the last to whom he will go. He has a sickness, but the Assyrian shall be his physician; he sees his wound, but King Jareb shall be his surgeon--but it shall be all in vain, for the first cannot cure, and the second cannot heal.

And has not this been in a measure our case? When our false religion gave way, when the moth fretted our garments, and rottenness decayed our props, was there not a secret leaning on an arm of flesh, a going to the Assyrian, a sending to King Jareb, a looking to the creature in some shape or another to bring ease and peace? But the wound could not be healed; there was no balm to be found from the creature; the moth had so fretted the garment that there was no patching it up again; the prop had become so rotten that it was no longer able to bear any weight.

4. But the Lord does not mean to leave Ephraim either to self-righteousness or to despair. He, therefore, says, "I will be unto Ephraim as a lion, and as a young lion to the house of Judah--I, even I, will tear and go away; I will take away, and none shall rescue him." Here the Lord speaks of Himself as being a lion unto Ephraim--that is, just as a lion tears a man to pieces, so will the Lord spiritually tear Ephraim. "I will rip you to pieces like a bear whose cubs have been taken away. I will tear you apart and devour you like a hungry lion." (Hos 13:8).

But what was this dealing with the Lord upon their souls for? Was it to destroy them? to rend them actually to pieces, so that none could deliver? This was not His object; it was to tear away everything that stood in the way of His grace, or that was substituted for His grace--to tear away false hopes, and rotten props, and creature expectations, so as to leave nothing, absolutely nothing, on which the creature could hang for support.

5. Now as long as the Lord is thus entering into controversy with Ephraim, there is in Ephraim's mind little else but murmuring, repining, fretting, rebellion, dissatisfaction, despondency, almost despair. And with all that, he cannot really pour out his soul before God, nor can he find or feel any nearness of access to a throne of grace.

But the Lord, secretly, in His own time and way, pours into Ephraim's soul the Spirit of grace and supplications; "He goes and returns to His place," until Ephraim is brought to his right mind; until rebellion is, in some measure, lulled in Ephraim's soul; until these waves are in some degree calmed, and he is brought to that spot spoken of in (Lev 26:41), "to accept of the punishment of his iniquity," to own that the Lord is righteous, and that He would be just if He sent him to hell.

6. Being thus divinely wrought upon, a blessed change takes place. Ephraim's heart now begins to work before the Lord; his affections melt, his soul is softened, his spirit meekened. He is no longer struggling like a wild bull in a net; nor kicking like a bullock unaccustomed to the yoke; he is no longer full of inward rebellion; but by the secret work of God in his soul, he is humbled and quieted, so as to lie low at God's footstool. "He acknowledges his offence, and seeks His face."

A change, which he could never have wrought himself, comes over him; and, under the meekening operations of the Holy Spirit in his soul, he is brought to repentance and confession. He draws near, therefore, with these words in his mouth--"Come, and let us return unto the Lord--for He has torn, and He will heal us; He has smitten, and He will bind us up."

7. But what language is this of Ephraim? Is it the language of 'mere creature-faith'? Is it the language of daring presumption? Is it the language of free-will? No, none of these; it is the language of spiritual faith, the Lord having kindled in Ephraim's soul a measure of divine faith, whereby he is enabled to return. "Come," he says (as the prodigal said, 'I will arise and go to my father'), "come, let us return." Here is his soul going out after the Lord; he is no longer laboring under rebellion and fretfulness; but a meekness and a quietness have been produced in his spirit. The Beloved has put in His hand by the hole of the door, and Ephraim's affections are moved for Him (Song 5:4). The stony heart has become a heart of flesh; and his pride, stubbornness, and rebellion having all melted away, he cries, "Come, and let us return to the Lord." It is with Ephraim now as it is with the Church as described in (Hosea 2:7), when she says with melting heart and weeping eyes, "I will go and return to my first Husband; for then was it better with me than now."

In this language, then, of Ephraim we see the return of affection, living desires kindled, faith communicated and drawn into exercise, godly sorrow at work in the soul, the breathing and going forth of prayer and supplication from the heart. O what a different feeling this is from rebellion and self-pity! And, depend upon it, friends, until the soul is thus meekened, softened, and brought down by the work of the Spirit upon it, there will be no saying with living faith, "Come, and let us return to the Lord, for He has torn, and He will heal us." It is, therefore, not the daring language of presumption, but the accents of living faith, "He has torn our souls with conviction; He has smitten with sorrow of heart; from Him came the wound, and from the same hand must come the remedy."

8. "After two days will He revive us; in the third day will He raise us up, and we shall live in His sight." In this mention of Ephraim's being raised up on the third day, there is doubtless an allusion to the resurrection of Jesus--Ephraim's covenant Head; for it is only in consequence, their union with their Head, that the members are quickened from their death in sin, are revived in their bondage (Ezra 9:8; Psalm 85:6), and will be raised up at the last day. "Your dead men shall live; together with My dead body shall they arise" (Isaiah 26:19). Thus Ephraim speaks in the language of faith--"After two days" (a definite time for an indefinite one) "will He revive us"--that is, out of all our darkness and bondage; "in the third day will He raise us up" by the power of Christ's resurrection, and, as thus rising with Jesus, "we shall live in His sight." Faith was here at work. The Lord gave to Ephraim this sweet confidence, and wrought in his soul a powerful persuasion of coming deliverance.

Now it is absolutely necessary to take all these things into connection with the text in order to understand its meaning. The language here employed by Ephraim is not such as can be taken into any mere professor's mouth. It is that "fruit of the lips" which the Lord specially "created" (Isaiah 57:19) and the root from which this special fruit sprang was the experience that has been described. "Then shall we know, if we follow on to know the Lord," is not then a general declaration which anybody may claim, but the special language of faith in a living soul, and of that only as having passed through such an experience as has been described.

Having thus cleared our way a little, we come to the text. "Then shall we know, if we follow on to know the Lord--His going forth is prepared as the morning; and He shall come unto us as the rain, as the latter and former rain unto the earth."

1. We gather, then, from these words, that there is such a thing in soul experience as "a following on to know the Lord," and indeed there is no obtaining the blessings which are laid up for the righteous, unless there is this following on. "To know the Lord" is the desire of every living soul; that is, to know Him by His own divine manifestations, by the gracious revelation of--His grace, His love, His presence, and His glory. And whatever measure of knowledge a child of God may have of the Lord, it will always seem in his mind to be an imperfect and deficient knowledge. The blessed apostle Paul, who had been in the third heavens, seemed still comparatively to know Him not, and therefore says, "That I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection;" as though all his knowledge of Christ was but as a drop compared with the ocean--as though all his experience was but as a single ray compared with the body of light and heat that dwells in the sun.

"To know the Lord" is to know experimentally and spiritually the power of Jesus' blood and righteousness; to know our eternal union with Him; to know Him so as to be led by the Spirit into soul communion with Him, that we may talk with Him as a man talks with his friend; to know Him so that the secrets of His heart should be revealed to us, and we enter by faith into the length and breadth and depth and height of the love of Christ which passes knowledge; to know Him so as to drink into His Spirit, and to have His image stamped by the Holy Spirit upon our souls; to know Him as coming down into our hearts out of His glorious sanctuary, filling our souls with His presence and His love; to know Him as formed in us the hope of glory, making our bodies His temple, dwelling in us, breathing Himself into us, speaking in us, moving as it were every affection of our heart and every faculty of our soul.

Thus to know the Lord is the sum and substance of vital godliness. And, as "to know the Lord" implies, as well as comprehends, the knowledge of Jehovah in His Trinity of Persons and Unity of essence, well may we say that, to know Jehovah the Father in His eternal love, to know Jehovah the Son in His redeeming blood, and to know Jehovah the Spirit in His divine operations and blessed teaching, is the foretaste of bliss below; and to know and see God as He is, is the consummation of bliss above.

But the expression "follow on," implies that there are many difficulties, obstacles, and hindrances in a man's way, which keep him back from "knowing the Lord." We will look at a few of these.

1. Sometimes, for instance, a thought like this will rush into the mind--"My religion is all in the flesh; God did not begin with me--I fear I am nothing else but a base hypocrite; and I have taken up a profession of religion, without the Lord the Spirit leading me into the truth as it is in Jesus." Now, when a solemn dread of this kind, perhaps in the lonely watches of the night, falls, as it were, like a ton of lead into a man's heart, it seems for the time effectually to check all the goings forth of his soul. In whatever state of mind he is, when it seems dropped into his conscience with conviction that he is nothing but a base hypocrite, it seems to cut the thread of all his religion; it effectually stops him from making any movement towards God. He will indeed sigh and groan as a forlorn and lost wretch; but the actings of faith are so damped, that he seems to be nothing but a dreadful reprobate in the sight of God, and he fears that hell will be his portion forever.

2. Sometimes when the soul is following eagerly on to know the Lord, Satan will hurl some blasphemous suggestion into our carnal mind. This fiery dart shall so kindle into a blaze those combustible materials of which our carnal nature is full, that it shall set them all on fire. There is no "following on" now to know the Lord, the soul is driven back upon itself; and as it recoils with horror from the imaginations that possess it, it draws back from all approach unto God, fearing to come within the pale of His holy presence, as conscious that His heart-searching eye sees all the abominations that are working within.

3. Sometimes the remembrance of past sins lying as a heavy load on the conscience so presses a man down into despondency and well-near despair, that it seems impossible for him to move one step towards Zion. He looks back on his past life, he calls to mind all his sins against God; and they appear so monstrous, so aggravated, so horrible, so black, that it seems utterly impossible they can be washed away, blotted out, and freely forgiven; and this keeps him from following on.

4. Sometimes the gusts of infidelity will so blow on a man's mind as to make him doubt the reality of all religion; aye, for a time persuade him that the Bible is not the inspired Word of God, and that everything which others say they have felt, and even what he has felt himself, was a delusion. Objections innumerable start up in his mind against the Scriptures; and Satan plies every argument that is suitable to nature and reason, until faith appears driven out of the field, and infidelity to riot at large in the soul. While these gusts blow, I am very sure there is no following on to know the Lord; nor until a lull comes, and faith once more lifts her drooping head, is there any power to move forward.

5. Sometimes the recollection of the many inconsistencies--the many foolish thoughts, the foolish words, and foolish and even sinful actions that a man has committed since he made a profession, so stand like mountains of difficulty in the way, that he is utterly unable to pass over them; and thus they check and keep him from following on to know the Lord; for he says to himself, "If I were really a partaker of the grace of God, I would never have acted in this way; the Lord would never have allowed me to commit this or that sin--surely I can be nothing but a base hypocrite, and the grace of God can never have touched my heart."

6. Sometimes mountains of worldly trouble stand in his way. His religion brings a cross with it. It calls down perhaps the persecution of his relatives; his children or his wife, his master or his parents oppose him; persons from whom he derives his daily bread set their faces against him; and his worldly prospects so stand in the way of his religion that he must either give them up--or the things of God. Here then sometimes the soul comes to a stand; it cannot go forward or backward; it cannot turn to the right hand or to the left--flesh pleads so hard, and faith is so weak; the right path is so rugged, and yet conscience remonstrates so loudly against the wrong, that a step can be taken in neither direction, and this prevents him from "following on to know the Lord."

7. Sometimes such darkness besets the mind, such clouds of unbelief rest on the soul, the way is so obscure, the path so out of sight, and we so unable to see any road at all, that we cannot "follow on," because we know not which way to go. Job was here when he said, "O that I knew where I might find Him! that I might come even to His seat! Behold, I go forward, but He is not there; and backward, but I cannot perceive Him." Darkness besets his path; and like a man in a dark night, he could not move a single step forward, lest he should fall down some precipice, or go out of the road altogether.

Now the work of the Spirit in a man's soul is to carry him on in spite of all these obstacles. Nature, and all the work of nature, and all the power of Satan working on nature, is to draw the man back; but the work of the Spirit on the soul is to lead him forward, to keep alive in him the fear of God, to strengthen him from time to time with strength in his inner man, to give him those enlargements, to drop in those hopes, to communicate that inward grace, and to gird up the loins of his mind, so that in spite of sense, reason, and nature, he is compelled to follow on. Sometimes he seems driven and sometimes drawn, sometimes led and sometimes carried--but in one way or another the Spirit of God so works upon him that, though he scarcely knows how, he still "follows on."

His very burdens make him groan for deliverance; his very temptations cause him to cry for help; the very difficulty and ruggedness of the road make him want to be carried every step; the very perplexity of the path compels him to cry out for a guide--so that the Lord the Spirit working in the midst of, and under, and through every difficulty and discouragement, still bears him through, and carries him on; and thus brings him through every trial and trouble and temptation and obstacle, until He sets him before the Lord in glory.

It is astonishing to me how our souls are kept alive. I am often a marvel to myself, that ever I should experience any revival, feeling at times such barrenness, such leanness, such deadness, such carnality, such inability to any spiritual thought. I have been often astonished that ever I could preach, that ever I could pray--astonished when the Lord's day comes that I could have a text to preach from, any life in my soul, or any power to say anything for the edification of God's people.

I believe a spiritually living man is a marvel to himself. Carried on, and yet so secretly; worked upon, and yet so mysteriously; and yet led on, guided and supported through so many difficulties and obstacles, that he is a miracle of mercy, and, as the apostle says, "a spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men" (1Corinthians 4:9); the world wondering, the angels admiring, and men standing astonished, how the quickened soul is carried on amid all its difficulties, obstacles, trials, and temptations; and yet in spite of all--"following on."

But "following on" for what? "To know the Lord" as the sum and substance of all religion, as the very marrow of vital godliness; to know Jesus, so as by faith to enter into His beauty and loveliness, and feel ourselves one spirit with Him, according to those words, "He that is joined to the Lord is one spirit" (1Corinthians 6:17).

But the Church, speaking thus in the person of Ephraim, says, "Then shall we know, if we follow on to know the Lord." What shall she know? She shall know that the Lord's hand supported her through all her temptations, that none of the devices of Satan against her have prospered, that all her temporal trials have worked together for her good, that God has made use of the things that seemed most against her that they might be most for her, and that He has overruled every dispensation so as to make it a dispensation of mercy. She shall know that her first convictions were from God, that the first dawns of light and life upon her soul were from Him, that He held her up when she must otherwise have utterly fallen, and that when Satan came in like a flood, it was the Spirit of the Lord that lifted up a standard against him. She shall know, also, that God was the Author and the Finisher of her faith, the source of her hope, and the fountain of her love. She shall know that she has not had one trial too heavy, nor shed one tear too much, nor put up one groan too many; but that all these things have in a most mysterious and inexplicable manner worked together for her spiritual good.

Now, friends, until we know something experimentally of the Lord we cannot know all this; until we know more or less of Jesus by His own sweet manifestations, the cloud is not taken up from our religion. Doubts, fears, despondencies, inexplicable mysteries will rest upon our path--both on our path in providence, and on our path in grace. But when we are brought to know Jesus, it is like the sun shining in the midst of the sky. Until the sun shines, mists and fogs hover over the scene; but when the sun arises, then the mists and fogs disperse, and the whole path shines forth outstretched to view. So when the Lord brings the soul into some sweet communion with Jesus, and He is made experimentally known, then it sees that the Lord has led it all these years in the wilderness; then it knows how kindly, and gently, and mercifully, and wisely He has dealt with it; then it feels as a matter of personal, individual, practical experience, that "all things work together for good to those who love God."

2. But we pass on to consider another prominent feature of our text; and that closely connected with the preceding. "His going forth is prepared as the morning." The Lord had said in the foregoing chapter, "I will go and return to My place;" that is, "I will hide Myself from Ephraim; he shall call, but I will not answer; he shall cry, but I will not appear." Now this is a part of experience through which every living soul passes-to know what it is to seek the Lord, and not find Him; to call upon Him, and receive no answer; to feel that the clouds of darkness so hide the throne of God as not to be able to see it, nor come near it, and yet to know that He is there.

And here lies the difference between a living soul in his darkest hours, and a dead professor. A living soul knows that God is to be found by His saints, but cannot always, nor often find Him for himself; but a dead professor knows nothing about God at all. The darkest fog might cover the hills that "heave up their broad backs into the sky" a little distance from where we now are; still I know they are there, because I have seen them again and again; but a thorough stranger to the country, who was passing for the first time through this valley, would not know that they were there, because the fog would hide them altogether from his view.

So a soul that has seen anything of the power and glory of God in the sanctuary, knows that there is His dwelling-place (Exodus 25:8), His goings (Psalms 68:24), and His way; and, like Jonah, "looks again toward His holy temple," though clouds and darkness entirely surround Him. But a dead professor of religion has never by faith entered into that sanctuary, nor lifted up believing hands toward His holy oracle (Psalms 28:2); and, therefore, as he knows nothing of light, knows nothing of darkness. All is with him a dead unmeaning religious service.

It is, then, to the living soul walking in darkness, and unable to find God, that the text speaks--"His going forth is prepared as the morning." There is AN APPOINTED TIME for the Lord to go forth; and this is sweetly compared to the rising of the sun. Does not "the dayspring know his place?" (Job 38:12). Does not the sun arise every day according to the minute before appointed? Is he ever before his time, or ever after his time? Did the free will of the creature ever hurry or retard his rising for a single second? Thus it is with the going forth of the Lord for the salvation of His people (Habakkuk 3:13), the going forth of the Lord in the revelation of His presence and His power, the going forth of the Lord from the place where He has for a while hidden Himself, to come down with light and life into the soul. All His glorious goings forth are as much prepared, and the moment is as much appointed, as the time is fixed every morning for the sun to rise.

But what is the state of things naturally, before the sun rises? Does not midnight precede the dawn, does not darkness come before light? And when it is midnight naturally, can we bid the sun arise and disperse the darkness? Is there not, as the psalmist says, a waiting for the morning naturally? "My soul waits for the Lord, more than those who watch for the morning" (Psalms 130:6). Is there not the invalid tossing on his restless couch, waiting for the morning? Is there not the shipwrecked mariner driven on the rocks, waiting anxiously for the morning, to know what is his prospect of safety, what friendly sail may be in sight? Is not the man lost in the woods waiting for the morning, that the sun may arise, and he find his way homeward?

But with all their waiting, they cannot bid the sun arise; they must wait until the appointed time. So the going forth of the Sun of Righteousness, the appearance of Christ in the heart, the sweet revelation of the Son of God, the lifting up of the light of His blessed countenance, is "prepared as the morning"--as fixed, as appointed in the mind of God as the morning to come in its season; but no more to be hurried than the sun is to be hurried up the sky. Aye, and it is as much an impossibility for us to bring the Lord into our

souls before the appointed time, or keep Him there when He is come, as for us to play the part of Joshua, and say, "Sun, stand still in Gibeon, and Moon, in the valley of Ajalon."

But "His going forth is prepared as the morning," and when He goes forth, He goes forth "conquering and to conquer," mounted on the white horse spoken of in Revelation (Revelation 6:2). He goes forth to conquer our enemies, to overcome our temptations, to lay our souls at His footstool, to arise like the sun in his strength, and to come into the heart with healing in His wings.

3. But we have another figure added, which shows the fruit and effect of His coming--"He shall come unto us as the rain, as the latter and former rain unto the earth." His going forth is compared to the rising of the SUN--glorious and certain; His coming to the RAIN--softening and fertilizing. And there is something very sweet not only in the figure itself--rain, but "in the latter and former rain" spoken of. To understand the spiritual, we must first know the natural meaning of this figure. In the land of Palestine there are not, as in our country, showers at all seasons of the year; generally speaking, there was only rain at two periods--one was called the former rain, and the other the latter rain. Thus we find that the prophet Samuel makes it a miracle, that God would send thunder and rain in the wheat harvest. It would not be a miracle with us, it is a common occurrence--but it is so unusual in those countries to have rain in harvest, that the prophet Samuel speaks of it as a miracle, and as a sign that God was displeased for their asking a king (1Sam 12:17,18). The Hebrews began their civil year in the autumn. Thus "the former or early rain" was the rain that fell in the autumn, and "the latter rain" that which fell in the spring. Now the former rain came upon the seed in the autumn, when it was committed to the furrow, and falling upon it, caused it to germinate and spring up. The latter rain fell in the spring upon the growing crop, and brought it forward for the harvest, which was much earlier there than with us, the barley harvest being at the time of the Passover, or our Easter, and the wheat harvest at the feast of Pentecost.

Now I think that in this early (or as it is here called, "former") and latter rains, we have a sweet figure of the visitations of Christ to the soul. The early rain, which comes first, is the first sight which the soul has of Christ--the season of the first love, the day of the espousals, when we go after the Lord into a land not sown (Jeremiah 2:2), when the Lord allures us, {as He speaks in Hosea 2:14} into the wilderness; the first days of the Son of man--the season that Job speaks of, when he says, "Oh that I were as in months past, as in the days when God preserved me; when His candle shined upon my head, and when by His light I walked through darkness, as I was in the days of my youth, when the secret of God was upon my tabernacle" (Job 29:2,3,4). "The days of my youth"--that is, the days of his spiritual youth--when he first fell in love with Jesus, and was full of zeal and warmth for His honor and glory. Christ then first comes as the early rain which falls on the seed committed to the furrows, and makes it spring up vigorous and strong.

But there is a WINTER to come after that. The Hebrews, as I have just said, began their year in the autumn, at which season the former rain fell. There was a winter then to pass through afterwards; there were frosts to nip the young wheat; there were long, cold, chilling nights to make it turn yellow in the blade; it often became stunted and sickly, and seemed to go backward rather than forward, and so it continued until the second or latter rain came in the spring.

Does not this well set forth the experience of the soul? After the first rain of Christ's presence and Christ's grace and power has come on the seed of truth in the heart, there follows the long winter, when the blades of faith, hope and love turn sickly and yellow, yes, sometimes (as we saw a few winters back), even the very blade gone, so that the wheat seems dead, as though all the crop were utterly destroyed; and yet life in the root, yet life struggling on, but still unable to spring forth until warmth and rain should come to make

it shoot afresh. And then, after all this long winter, drops down in the appointed time the latter rain just before the harvest, the warm showers falling on it just before the Lord "puts in the sickle, because the harvest is come" (Mark 4:29). Here is the smile of the Lord upon the soul just before He takes it home, the breathing of His presence and love before He gathers it to be finally and everlastingly in His bosom.

Now it is said "He SHALL come" in this way, first in the espousals, and then in the wedding; first in the sowing of the seed, and then in the reaping of the harvest; first to make it germinate and come up out of the soil, covered with the thick clods, and then to fill the ear before it is gathered into the garner to be forever with the Lord.

The Church speaks here in a spirit of prophecy. If I may use an expression, which perhaps you will hardly receive unless I explain it--the Church here believes for her children. Not believes for them in a way of justification, as though her faith could be any substitute for theirs, or be any way available for their salvation; I do not mean that; but believes for them in the way of experience. We often find this as a daily matter of fact. A man who has passed through some severe trial of soul and been delivered, when he sees another in the same trial, can believe for him, though the man passing through it cannot believe for himself. So the Church in this way believes for her children. She believes in the Lord's faithfulness, and being favored with strong confidence in His mercy, opens her arms wide, and prophesies of the visitations of His favor to all her children.

And now before I close, let me gather up my fragments, and run over what I have endeavored to unfold of the meaning of the text. There is then a following on to know the Lord, after the soul has been smitten, wounded, and torn; and he that thus follows on to know the Lord amid all the difficulties and troubles of the way will surely know Him to his eternal joy; for His going forth is prepared as the morning which must arise in its appointed time. Nor will He go forth only "as the light in the morning, when the sun rises, even a morning without clouds" (2Samuel 23:4), but He will also come "as the latter and former rain unto the earth." He will come unto every parched soul that feels itself like a barren wilderness, as the latter and the former rain, to water the ridges thereof abundantly, to settle the furrows thereof, to make it soft with showers, to bless the springing thereof, that the valleys may be covered over with grain, that they may shout for joy, and also sing (Psalms 65:10,13).

We see, then, that the words of the text are not such expressions as any professor of religion may take into his lips. They are not to be thrown down by the minister from the pulpit to encourage anybody and everybody, whether they know anything of divine dealings or not. They are not to be held out as an encouragement to carnal people, that they are to follow on to know the Lord, and make themselves religious, whether God works in them or not.

But they are spoken to those who have passed through a certain experience, and are prophetic of the happy termination of that experience. And all who are passing through it know something of the things I have been speaking of; they know something of the difficulties of the road, something of following on in spite of those difficulties; and something too, at times, of a sweet confidence and blessed persuasion in their souls that they shall know the end of the present trials, and the reason of the Lord's dispensation, believing in their very hearts, by the Spirit's inward testimony, that the going forth of the Lord is prepared as the morning, and that He will come in His own appointed time and way, as the latter and the former rain unto the earth.

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