

The Soul's Growth in Grace

by J.C. Philpot

Growth in grace refers to the supernatural and progressive development of the divine life in the soul, marked by an increase in faith, hope, and love.

Scripture: Proverbs 4:18, Isaiah 18:5, Matthew 6:30, Matthew 15:28, Matthew 17:20, Mark 4:28, Acts 6:8, Romans 4:20, Romans 14:1, Philippians 3:13, Hebrews 10:22, 1 Peter 2:2, 2 Peter 3:18, 1 John 2:12

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Sanctification"

Description

J.C. Philpot preaches about the spiritual journey of growth in grace, comparing it to the changing seasons in the life of a believer. He emphasizes the importance of experiencing spiritual growth, highlighting the stages of Spring, Summer, and Winter in the soul's development. Philpot delves into the necessity of facing trials and temptations to deepen faith, hope, and love, while also addressing the challenges of battling spiritual doubts, fears, and pride. He explores the impact of divine discipline, the influence of Satan's temptations, and the struggles against carnal desires in the believer's journey towards spiritual maturity.

Transcript

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

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

Figures also and comparisons are made use of in the Word of truth which clearly point to the same doctrine. Thus the divine life is compared sometimes to the course of the sun--"The path of the just is as the shining light, that shines more and more unto the perfect day;" (Prov. 4:18) sometimes to the growth of grain, "first the blade, then the ear, after that, the full grain in the ear;" (Mark 4:28) sometimes to the increase of the human body, as commencing with "new-born babes," (1 Pet. 2:2) and advancing on to

"little children", "young men" and "fathers;" (1 John 2:12-14) sometimes to a race, where the runner "forgets those things which are behind, and reaches forth unto those things which are before." (Phil. 3:13)

The very idea indeed of life implies advance, growth, progress, increase. Lambs grow up into sheep, vine buds into vine branches, (John 15:5) slips into trees, (Isa. 17:10;61:3) sons into fathers. (1 Tim. 1:18;5:1) Christians are not gate-posts, but palm trees and cedars; (Ps. 92:12) not loungers, but soldiers warring a good warfare; (1 Tim. 1:18) not idlers at home on armchairs and sofas, but travelers and pilgrims seeking a country; not careless, and at ease, like Laish and Moab, (Judges 18:7; Jer. 48:11), but pressed out of measure by trials and temptations, so as at times to despair even of life. (2 Cor. 1:8)

Their grand distinguishing mark then is, that they grow; and, therefore, absence of growth implies absence of life. Hypocrites, indeed, may grow in hypocrisy, Pharisees in self-righteousness, Arminians in fleshly perfection, dead Calvinists in head-knowledge, proud professors in presumption, self-deceivers in delusion, and the untried and unexercised in vain confidence. But the dead never grow in the divine life, for "the root of the matter" is not in them. (Job 19:28)

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

The answer, then, to the question, "What is growth in grace?" is contained, I believe, in the text, and I shall therefore endeavor to unfold it in an experimental manner according to the ability which God may give me. The text speaks of three distinct stages in divine life, Spring, Harvest, and an intermediate state between the two which we may call Winter. We shall indeed find as we proceed that the Spring is divided into two stages, the latter of which we may term Summer; and thus growth in grace is compared to the advance of the seasons in the year.

But there is this remarkable difference between the natural and the spiritual seasons, between growth in nature and growth in grace, that the succession of seasons is not the same in each. Nature commences with blooming spring, advances on to glowing summer, ripens into yellow harvest, and dies away in dreary winter. Grace, according to the line of experience that I am about to describe, commences with Spring--with "the bud", and "the flower of the sour grape". Thence it advances on to Summer, when "the bud is perfect", and "the sour grape is ripening in the flower". Does not Harvest immediately follow? Alas! no. "Before the harvest" another seasons comes. Between summer and it, Winter--a long dreary winter intervenes. Thus, the order of seasons in the divine life is not spring, summer, harvest, winter--but spring, summer, winter, harvest.

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

soul, and the soul be ignorant of them, should know neither their time nor their place, is a contradiction. The evidence of feeling is as strong, as distinct, as perceptible as the evidence of sight. I know by sight that this object is black and that white. I know as certainly by feeling that this substance is cold and that hot. I may not be able to tell why the one is hot and the other cold, but I know the fact that they are so.

Thus a new-born soul may not be able to tell why it feels, nor whence those feelings arise; but it is as conscious that it does feel as that it exists. It suits well the empty profession of the day to talk about early piety, and convictions from childhood, and Sunday school religion, and baptismal regeneration, and infant lispings, and the dawnings of the youthful mind. "The privilege of pious parents, of family religion, of the domestic altar, of a gospel ministry, of obedience to ordinances, of a father's prayers, of a mother's instruction"--who has not heard these things brought forward again and again as the beginning of what is called Christian conversion and decided piety? Many of these things are well in their place, and not to be despised or neglected; but when they are held up as the almost necessary beginning of a work altogether heavenly and supernatural, they must be set aside. Thousands have had these things who have perished in their sins; and thousands have not had them who have been saved with an everlasting salvation.

A true beginning is a beginning FELT. I will not say that we must be able to point out the moment, the hour, the day or the week, though the nearer we approach the precision of time, the nearer we approach to a satisfactory evidence. But the season, the time within certain limits, when new feelings, new emotions, new needs, new desires arose in the heart, can never be forgotten by one who has really experienced them.

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

True religion then begins with an entrance into the soul of supernatural light and supernatural life. How or why it comes, the soul knows not; for "the wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound thereof, but can not tell whence it comes and where it goes; so is every one that is born of the Spirit." (John 3:8) The wind itself is not seen, but its effects are felt. The sound of a going is heard "in the tops of the mulberry trees," (1 Chron. 14:15) where God Himself is not seen. The voice of the Lord powerful and full of majesty was heard by those who saw no similitude. (Deut. 4:12) Thus effects are felt, though causes are unknown.

Streams flow into the heart from a hidden source; rays of light beam into the soul from an unrisen sun; and kindlings of life awaken in us a new existence out of an unseen fountain. The new-born babe feels life in all its limbs, though it knows not yet the earthly father from whence that natural life sprung. And thus new-born souls are conscious of feelings hitherto unpossessed, and are sensible of a tide of life, mysterious and incomprehensible, ebbing and flowing in their heart, though "Abba Father" has not yet burst from their lips.

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

of dust, have sensations to register every pain and every pleasure, and be tremblingly alive to every change without and every change within; and shall not our immortal soul be equally endowed with a similar barometer to fluctuate up and down the scale of spiritual life? We must lay it down then at the very threshold of vital godliness, that if a man has not been conscious of new feelings, and cannot point out, with more or less precision, some particular period, some never-to-be-forgotten season, when these feelings came unbidden into his heart, he has not yet passed from death into life. He is not in Christ, if he is not a new creature. (2 Cor. 5:17)

But the question is arising to your lips, "What are these new feelings? Describe them, if you will or can, that we may compare our heart with them, for as in water face answers to face, so does the heart of man to man".

I believe, then, that the first sensation of a new-born soul is that of LIGHT. "The entrance of Your words gives light." (Ps. 119:130) "The people which sat in darkness saw great light; and to those who sat in the region and shadow of death, light is sprung up." (Matt. 4:16) This was the light from heaven above the brightness of the sun, which struck persecuting Saul to the earth, and of which he afterwards said, "God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, has shined in our hearts." (2 Cor. 4:6)

But, together with this ray of supernatural light, and blended with it in mysterious union, supernatural life flows into the soul. "Of His own will He begot us with the word of truth." (Jas. 1:18) "You has He quickened"--that is, made alive--"who were dead in trespasses and sins." (Eph. 2:1)

Every ray of natural light is not single, but sevenfold, as may be seen in the rainbow, where every distinct ray of the sun is broken into seven different colors. And thus the first ray of supernatural light which shines into the soul out of the Sun of righteousness is really not single, but manifold. Mingled with heavenly light, and inseparable from it--life, feeling and power, faith and prayer, godly fear and holy reverence, conviction of guilt and hungerings and thirstings after righteousness--flow into the heart. And it is this blended union of feelings which distinguishes the warm sunlight which melts the heart from the cold moonlight that enlightens the head. The latter begins and ends in hard, dry, barren knowledge, like the Aurora Borealis playing over the frozen snows of the north; while the former penetrates into and softens the secret depths of the soul, and carries with it a train of sensations altogether new, heavenly and divine.

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

It is as though all his days he had been asleep, and were now awakened--asleep upon the top of a mast, with the raging waves beneath; as if all his past life were a dream, and the dream were now at an end. He has been hunting butterflies, blowing soap bubbles, angling for minnows, picking daisies, building houses of cards, and idling life away like an idiot or a madman. He had been perhaps wrapped up in a profession, smuggled into a church, daubed over with untempered mortar, advanced even to the office of a deacon, or mounted in a pulpit. He had learned to talk about Christ, and election, and grace, and fill his mouth with

the language of Zion. And what did he know of these things? Nothing, absolutely nothing. Ignorant of his own ignorance (of all kinds of ignorance the worst), he thought himself rich, and increased with goods, and to have need of nothing, and knew not he was wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked. (Rev. 3:17)

But one ray of supernatural light, penetrating through the veil spread over the heart, has revealed that terrible secret--a just God, who will by no means clear the guilty. This piercing ray has torn away the bed too short, and stripped off the covering too narrow. It has rent asunder the "fine clothes, gowns, capes, and purses; their mirrors, linen garments, head ornaments, and shawls. Instead of smelling of sweet perfume, they will be a stench. They will wear ropes for sashes, and their well-set hair will fall out. They will wear rough sackcloth instead of rich robes. Their beauty will be gone. Only shame will be left to them." (Isa. 3:22-24)

A sudden, peculiar conviction has rushed into the soul. One absorbing feeling has seized fast hold of it, and well near banished every other. "There is a God, and I am a sinner before Him", is written upon the heart by the same divine finger that traced those fatal letters on the palace wall of the king of Babylon, which made the joints of his loins to be loosed, and his knees to smite one against another. (Dan. 5:5,6)

"What shall I do? Where shall I go? What will become of me? Mercy, O God! Mercy, mercy! I am lost, ruined, undone! Fool, madman, wretch, monster that I have been! I have ruined my soul. O my sins, my sins! O eternity, eternity!" Such and similar cries and groans, though differing in depth and intensity, go up out of the new-born soul well near day and night at the first discovery of God and of itself. These feelings have taken such complete possession of the heart that it can find no rest except in calling upon God. This is the first pushing of the young bud through the bark, the first formation of the green shoot, wrapped up as yet in its leaves, and not opened to view. These are the first pangs and throes of the new birth before the tidings are brought, "A child is born." "What shall I do to be saved?" cried the jailer. "God be merciful to me a sinner!" exclaimed the tax-collector. "Woe is me, for I am undone!" burst forth from the lips of Isaiah.

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

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

Thus, when the Holy Spirit quickens the soul, He plants within it, a new creature, perfect in all its parts. The child in its mother's womb has all the limbs of a man. Nor do new-born babes of grace differ from little children, young men, or fathers, in the number of their graces, but only in the growth and development of them. Thus in the new-born soul there is hope, which keeps it from despair; love, which at times gleams out of terror; and faith, which cleaves hard to the promise, in spite of unbelief. These buds, indeed, not

being called forth by the beams of the sun, but being chilled and checked by the north wind that blows over the garden, (Cant. 4:16), could not expand themselves, and were scarcely seen. But the first rays of the warm sun, the first genial breezes of the south wind that quiets the earth, (Job 37:17), awaken, as it were, into a new existence these hidden, unopened buds.

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

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

Others assert that there is no faith but the full assurance of faith, and that all that falls short of this is no faith at all. But I would ask, "Is there any difference between a soul dead in sins and one quickened into spiritual life? Are there not fears, terrors, convictions, pangs, cries, groans, and a host of feelings in the one which are not in the other? Whence arises this sense of guilt and wrath, this remorse for the past, and terror of the future?" I answer because divine faith credits the divine testimony. Before the soul was quickened into spiritual life the holiness and justice of God were the same, His wrath against sin and the curse of His righteous law were the same. But the soul did not feel them. Why not? Because the word was not "mixed with faith in those who heard it." (Heb. 4:2).

A divine principle was needed to credit the divine testimony. He had heard these things by the hearing of the ear in the dead, outward letter. He had not seen them by the seeing of the eye, by an inward revelation. If the soul did not believe the word which entered it, did not credit the commandment which came to it, (Rom. 7:9), how could it fall beneath the power of it? It did not formerly care for eternal realities, because it did not believe them by a divine faith. But now it receives, credits and believes the testimony of God, and this very faith is the cause of its alarm. If it could cease to believe, it would cease to feel.

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

Or faith may be compared to the eye, which receives different impressions according as it looks upon different things; if upon things agreeable, impressions that are pleasant, if upon things disagreeable, impressions that are painful. But the eye is the same, and the mode of seeing is the same. Thus faith is

the hand as well as the eye of the soul.

If God reveals to the conscience His wrath against sin, faith is the hand to receive and the eye to see this divine testimony. If God reveal to the soul pardon and mercy in Christ, the same hand opens to receive, the same eye uncloses to see the heavenly manifestation. Paul recounts (Heb. 11) the exploits of faith, such as subduing kingdoms, working righteousness, obtaining promises, stopping the mouths of lions, and performing many things of very different and dissimilar kinds. But he never tells us that the faith itself was different, or that Abel, Enoch, Noah, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, and the other saints, of whom the world was not worthy, had all a different faith according to their different exploits. When the horror of great darkness fell upon Abraham, and God said to him, "Know of a surety that your seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs," (Gen. 15:13) the faith whereby he credited this divine testimony was the same as that by which he believed in the Lord, when He said, "So shall your seed be," (Gen. 15:5), and He counted it to him for righteousness. No, Abraham's faith never was so strong as when it acted most in the dark, and bade him stretch forth his hand to slay his son. There is but "one faith", as well as but one Lord and one baptism. And therefore Paul says that "the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith;" (Rom. 1:17) that is, the righteousness of God in the law to faith in the law, and the righteousness of God in the gospel to faith in the gospel.

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

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

The second bud which expands to receive the warm sunshine is that of HOPE. It was, indeed, in the soul before. There is no new creation of this bud by the rays of the sun, but only an expansion, a development of it. In the midst of all the gloom and despondency which brooded over it, there was a secret something at the bottom of the soul which kept it from despair. When the floodgates of divine wrath are opened in the natural conscience of a reprobate, he is usually swept away by it into the blackness of darkness forever. Saul falls upon his sword, and Judas hangs himself. In the natural conscience of a reprobate there is wrath in reality; and wrath, too, against the person as well as against the sin. In the spiritual conscience of the elect there is but wrath in apprehension; and that wrath against the sin, not against the person.

Thus the vessels of wrath call upon the mountains and rocks to fall upon them and hide them--their persons--from the wrath of the Lamb. The vessels of mercy cry, "Pardon our iniquity; for it is great". Natural guilt drives the soul from God--"Let not God speak with us, lest we die." (Exod. 20:19) Spiritual guilt drives the soul to God--"Cast me not away from Your presence;" (Psalm. 51:11) "Let us search and try our ways, and turn again to the Lord. Let us lift up our heart with our hands unto God in the heavens." (Lam. 3:40,41) A graceless professor never is at anchor. He is moored to the shore by a silken thread. The first storm snaps his line, and drives him on the rocks of despair where concerning faith he makes shipwreck. (1 Tim. 1:19) Thus of these castaways some are driven to the madhouse, and others to the gallows; some pine away in their iniquities, and others curse God and die.

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

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) dwells in the heart that is sick, (Prov. 13:12) and is the portion of those whose mouth is in the dust. (Lam. 3:29) Such wise master-builders would allow the soldier no helmet, (1 Thess. 5:8) the sailor no anchor, (Heb. 6:19) and the prisoner no stronghold. (Zech. 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. (Eccles. 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, while counterfeits look downward. Thus true hope centers in God; false hope centers in self. "Hope in God", said David to his soul. (Ps. 42:11) "And now, Lord, what do I wait for? my hope is in You." (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 reed, which grows out of the mire, and withers before any other herb; and to the web which the spider spins out of its own stomach. (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 trusts in man, and makes flesh his arm, and whose heart departs 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 near 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 donkeys, at the foot of the mount, (Gen. 22:5) that it may have communion with Jehovah Jireh. Thus hope feeds upon the unseen things which faith realizes.

Both faith and hope are engaged on the same things, but not in the same way. Faith credits, hope anticipates; faith realizes, 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, (Mark 10:27) of supernatural power in creature helplessness, (Rom. 4:19-22), to credit which revelation is the essence of spiritual faith. By faith Abraham realized 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 new-born 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 forever, 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 valley of trouble; (Hos. 2:15; Josh. 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 You? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside You".

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 color 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 hidden, (Mark 7:24) but is known and read by

all men.

So amid the legal repentance and the sorrow that works death, which were wrapped around it, godly sorrow, while in the bud, could scarcely 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 has pierced, and mourns for Him as one that mourns for his firstborn.

GODLY FEAR, again in the bud was darkened and obscured by the fear which has 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, while 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 has 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 prays," (Acts 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, the 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. (1 Pet. 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 fertilized if the flower were not perfected, but would drop off together with the flower, like the untimely figs of a fig-tree. (Rev. 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, (1 Cor. 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." (Psalm. 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, (Num. 13:26) which was in the uttermost of the border of Edom, (Num. 20:16) and therefore close to the Holy Land.

There are lessons to be learned, 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 traveled, as yet but little, little known. Harvest does not succeed summer in the kingdom of grace, as in the kingdom of nature. "Before the harvest" another season comes. A long and dreary WINTER intervenes, and with winter comes the pruning knife of the heavenly Husbandman, who purges the vine, "that it may bring forth more fruit." (John 15:2) "For before 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 valley, and scarcely an inclined place. Nor have we any lack of fancy drawing masters, who will sketch us out a beautiful landscape, with heaven itself at the end. But these are such persons as fire-side travelers 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 needs 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, will endeavor 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 noxious shoots. Natural belief had grown rapidly up with spiritual faith, fleshly ardor with heavenly zeal, universal charity with divine love, and the knowledge that puffs up the

head with the grace that humbles 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 everyone by its own standard, and well near trampling under its feet every one of David's soldiers that was in distress, in debt, or discontented. (1 Sam 22:2) Forgetting its base original, when it was a beggar on the ash-heap, 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. 11:16) Thus pride was doing that secret work which Deer so well describes-

"The heart uplifts with God's own gifts.

And makes even grace a snare."

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 patience 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, until its own clothes abhor it, (Job 9:31) nor cast into "deep mire where there is no standing." (Ps. 19:2) 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 Savior.

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 before 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 allowed 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 cuts 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 sinful 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 sinful nature. She has the appetite of a vulture, and the digestion of an ostrich. She has as many colors 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 groveling 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 new-comer, 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. No, 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. (1 Sam 9:24;Levi 8:32) Thus nature becomes religious, and 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 noxious shoots of nature. 2. To cut down to their due proportion--their bearing length, the stalks 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 diminishing, 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 mercury in a thermometer. The quantity of mercury in the bulb never varies, but it rises or falls in the tube

according to the heat of the day. Thus faith, though it abides in the heart without loss or diminishing, 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--"when the secret of God was upon his tabernacle," as when "he cursed the day of his birth," 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, (Gen 20:2) and when with but his 318 men he pursued and smote the army of four mighty kings? (Gen 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 withheld, but independent and self-sufficient; then we "have no changes, and so fear not God." But if faith ebbs and flows, 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 sinful human 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.

But its effects were soon felt. Natural religion began to wither. A secret dissatisfaction with self began to creep over the soul. Zeal did not shoot so strong, and faith seemed to hang its head, and hope appeared to droop. Gloom and despondency began to gather over the mind. The feeling grew stronger and stronger that there was something wrong somewhere. Suspicions as to the reality of its religion, and whether there

was not something rotten at the very core, now begin to haunt the soul. Under these doubtings it goes to God to seek deliverance from Him. But all is dark there, and the heavens gather blackness. The pruning knife has cut off the supply of sap. The branches of nature wither away, and drop off from the stem; and the shoots of grace look sickly and drooping.

But there is another branch of this sentence which God does not Himself execute, but leaves to the agency of others. All things that happen, flow from the divine decrees. There is no chance work or contingency in the government of God; but "He does according to His will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth". Nevertheless He is not the author of sin; for He "cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempts He any man" (James 1:13) Thus we must divide the decrees of God into His executive decree, and His permissive decree. All that is good He executes with His own hand. All that is evil happens according to His decree, and cannot but come to pass as necessarily as all that is good, but He leaves the execution of it to an evil heart, or to an evil devil. These act unconscious of the divine decree, and think only to fulfill their own evil purposes. Thus to them belongs the wickedness, and to God the glory. Satan when he tempted Judas, and the Jews when they crucified Christ, both fulfilled the divine decree, and formed connecting links of the great chain of redemption; but God did not by any secret impulse instigate them to act wickedly.

Thus in the execution of the second part of the sentence passed upon the tree in the text, God, who cannot be the author of sin, leaves it to be performed by other agents. "They", that is the branches pruned off and cut down, "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."

The portion of the sentence which God leaves to be performed by other agents is as important, I may say as indispensable, as the portion which He executes Himself. These agents are two-fold-

1. The fowls of the mountains.
2. The beasts of the earth.

We may perhaps discover who are intended by "the fowls of the mountains" by referring to the Lord's own explanation of the parable of the sower. We read in that parable (Mark 4:4) of "the fowls of the air", which came and "devoured the seed that was sown by the wayside", which the Lord thus explains--"When they have heard, Satan comes immediately, and takes away the word that was sown in their hearts". But there is something we must not pass over unnoticed in the word "left"--"They shall be left together unto the fowls of the mountains", etc.

How much is contained in the expression "left"! It is as though the soul were given up, abandoned, forsaken, not indeed fully nor finally, but cast off as it were for a time, and delivered, like Samson, to make sport for its enemies. The tree with its sprigs cut off close to the stem, with the branches that shot up from its roots cut down and taken away, and the graft itself pruned down to a remnant of what it was, stands a melancholy stump.

Winter has come; the sun no longer shines. The sap has sunk down into the root; life seems pretty well extinct, and the axe appears ready to finish what the pruning hook has left undone. And now what does it seem fit for? To become a roosting place for every unclean bird. "There shall the great owl make her nest, and lay, and hatch, and gather under her shadow--there shall the vultures also be gathered, every one with her mate." (Isa. 34:15) These keen-eyed fowls of the mountains are always watching their opportunity

to alight upon a soul forsaken of God. The eagle "dwells and abides on the rock, upon the crag of the rock, and the strong place. From thence she seeks the prey, and her eyes behold afar off. Her young ones also suck up blood--and where the slain are, there is she." (Job 39:28-30) And as the "Fowls of the Mountains" seem to signify the fallen angels, those accursed spirits, whose delight is to destroy all whom they can, and to harass all whom they cannot destroy; so by "the BEASTS OF THE EARTH" we may understand those earthly lusts, carnal desires, and base workings of a fallen nature which war against the soul.

Now it is most difficult, if not altogether impossible, for a tempted soul to distinguish clearly and accurately between the temptations which spring from Satan and those which arise from the carnal mind. And for this reason, that Satan can only work on our fallen nature, and thus we are unable to distinguish between the voluntary lusts of our carnal heart, and those which arise from the suggestion of Satan. He tempts most when least seen. But though when under the temptation, we cannot often, nor indeed usually, distinguish between the suggestions of Satan and the spontaneous lustings of our own hearts, yet, looking at each at a distance, we may draw this distinction between them, that spiritual wickedness, what Paul calls "filthiness of the spirit," (2 Cor. 7:1) may be ascribed to "the fowls of the mountains"; and carnal wickedness, the "filthiness of the flesh", to the beasts of the earth. Thus all those peculiar temptations respecting the being and character of God, which are usually unknown, or at least unfelt by us in our days of unregeneracy, but afterwards often sadly haunt the soul, we may ascribe to the suggestions of Satan.

A temptation, for instance, comes into the soul like a flash of lightning. It may perhaps be an infidel doubt that starts up suddenly in the mind. This hidden poison at first perhaps has little apparent effect, as we at once reject the thought with horror. But as soon as the Word of God is opened, or the throne of grace approached, the black thoughts, the powerful questionings, the harassing suspicions which fill the mind, show us in a moment how the subtle poison is coursing through every vein. The Word of God has lost all its sweetness and power, and the voice of prayer is mute. Darkness and disquietude fill the soul. The heavens are clothed with blackness, and sackcloth is made their covering. Well do the words of Jeremiah describe this state of soul--"I beheld the earth, and lo, it was without form and void; and the heavens, and they had no light. I beheld the mountains"--the stable foundations of truth--"and, lo, they trembled, and all the hills moved lightly. I beheld, and, lo, there was no man, and all the birds of the heavens were fled." (Jer. 4:23-25)

I never found anything to sweep away all my religion in any way to be compared with such thoughts as these. Unbelief has often shaken it to the very center, guilt has covered it with midnight darkness, and fears of death in sickness have cut it down to the root. But 'infidel doubts' sweep away the foundation itself, and "if the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?"

Or, perhaps, some dreadful imagination rushes into the mind, such as Deer justly calls "masterpieces of hell". These rush in in a moment, when perhaps we are on our knees, or reading the Scripture, or hearing the word. There is something so horrible in them, that a man dares not for a moment think of them, even to himself, but strives to the uttermost of his power to banish them from his mind. He will start up from his knees, throw aside the Bible, plunge his thoughts into the world, yes, even into the lusts of the flesh, rather than not drive away such fearful imaginations. It seems as if we were committing the unpardonable sin, as if God would be provoked to cut us off in a moment, and send us to hell; as if the earth itself would open its mouth and swallow up such monsters of iniquity. I will allude no farther to these thoughts than to express my belief that many of God's children are sadly pestered by them.

The great change which has befallen the soul, the mighty contrast between its present state and what it was "in months past as in the days when God preserved it, when His candle shined upon its head, and the rock poured out rivers of oil"--this great and unlooked for revolution is of itself sufficient to kindle all the rebellion and enmity of the carnal mind. Upon these, therefore, Satan works. He and his tribe of evil spirits, these "fowls of the mountains", come flocking down with their flapping wings, and brood over the stump which God has for a time abandoned to them. They are said "to summer upon it", which expression may signify that they spend a certain season upon the tree cut down; that their visits are not for a day or a week, but for a whole season, a definite and prolonged time. But I think the expression points also to the delight, the infernal glee with which these foul birds come trooping down to their prey. It is their summer when it is the soul's winter.

If the devil ever feels joy, it is in making souls miserable. The cries of the damned are his music, their curses and blasphemies his songs of triumph, and their anguish and despair his wretched feast. Thus when these fowls of the mountains darken the wretched stump, and spread over it their black and baleful wings, it is their summer. And as they brood over it, they breathe into it their own wretched enmity against all that is holy and blessed. Hard thoughts of God, heavings up of enmity against His sovereignty, boilings up of inward blasphemy, and of such feelings as I dare not express, are either infused or stirred up by them. It is the soul's mercy that "the holy seed, the substance thereof, is in it, though it has cast its leaves"; and that "there is hope of a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again" and "through the scent of water it will bud, and bring forth boughs like a plant." (Job 14:7-9). Nothing but divine life in the soul could withstand such assaults as these. And thus there is in the midst of, and in spite of, all the heavings and bubblings of inward rebellion, a striving against them, a groaning under them, an abhorrence of them, a self-loathing on account of them, and at times an earnest cry to be delivered from them.

But there are "the beasts of the earth" as well as "the fowls of the mountains", who sit on this forsaken stump. These are said "to winter upon them"; that is, on the remnants of the broken branches. This expression "winter" points apparently to the season of the year during which the bea

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/jc-philpot/the-souls-growth-in-grace/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net