

Winter Afore Harvest or the Soul's Growth in Grace - Part 3

by J.C. Philpot

The sermon explores the effects of pruning on the soul, highlighting the struggle between the fowls of the mountains and the beasts of the earth, and the resulting lessons of humility, helplessness, and self-loathing.

Scripture: Isaiah 18:5, Mark 9:24, 1 Corinthians 3:18, Ephesians 2:10, James 1:13

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Divine Providence"

Description

J.C. Philpot delves into the effects of spiritual struggles and the pruning process in the soul, leading to a deep dissatisfaction with self, weakened zeal, and doubts about one's faith. He explains the divine decrees of God, distinguishing between His executive and permissive decrees, emphasizing that God is not the author of sin. Philpot describes how God allows other agents, like fallen angels and earthly lusts, to carry out His decrees, leading to a season of spiritual desolation and temptation. He highlights the importance of experiencing a deep spiritual harvest in the soul, where true humility, helplessness, and self-loathing are cultivated, ultimately creating a case for the Divine Redeemer to manifest His power and salvation.

Transcript

Isa 18:5,6

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 doeth 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 tempteth He any man" Jas 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 fulfil 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 Mr 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 cometh immediately, and taketh 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 "dwelleth and abideth on the rock, upon the crag of the rock, and the strong place. From thence she seeketh 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" 2Co 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 dumb. 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 centre, 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 Hart 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, yea, 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 it 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 east 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 beasts of the earth take up their abode upon it. And it seems to intimate that they and the fowls of the mountains divide the year between them. The one take the summer, and the other the winter. Thus there is change of visitants, but no respite for the tree; a diversity of temptation, but no relief for the soul.

These beasts of the earth, I observed, seemed to signify the lusts of our fallen nature, the wretched inheritance which we derive from our first parent. "The first man is of the earth, earthy." And, "as is the earthy, such are they also that are earthy" 1Co 15:47,48. The sin of our fallen nature is a very mysterious thing. We read of the mystery of iniquity as well as of the mystery of godliness; and the former has lengths, depths, and breadths as well as the latter; depths which no human plumbline ever fathomed, and lengths which no mortal measuring line ever yet meted out.

Thus the way in which sin sometimes seems to sleep, and at other times to awake up with renewed strength; its active, irritable, impatient, restless nature, the many shapes and colours it wears, the filthy holes and puddles in which it grovels, the corners into which it creeps, its deceitfulness, hypocrisy, craft, plausibility, intense selfishness, utter recklessness, desperate madness, and insatiable greediness, are secrets, painful secrets, only learnt by bitter experience. In the spiritual knowledge of these two mysteries-the mystery of sin and the mystery of salvation-all true religion consists. In the school of experience we are kept day after day, learning and forgetting these two lessons, being never able to understand them, and yet not satisfied unless we know them, pursuing after an acquaintance with them, and finding that they still, like a rainbow, recede from us as fast as we pursue. Thus we find realised in our own souls those heavenly contradictions, those divine paradoxes, that the wiser we get, the greater fools we become 1Co 3:18; the stronger we grow, the weaker we are 2Co 12:9,10; the more we possess, the less we have 2Co 6:10; the more completely bankrupt, the more frankly forgiven Lu 7:42; the more utterly lost, the most perfectly saved; and when most like a child, the greatest in the kingdom of heaven Mt 18:4.

Now, as the nature of the fowls of the mountains cannot be known by merely gazing at them as they hover in the air, so the disposition of the beasts of the earth cannot be learned by seeing them in a travelling show, locked up in the dens of a menagerie. We know them best by feeling their talons. These wild beasts during the summer, when the sun was up, and the day hot, lay crouching in their holes and caverns. "The sun ariseth, they gather themselves together, and lay them down in their dens" Ps 104:22. The lewd monkey, the snarling dog, the greedy wolf, the untameable hyena, the filthy jackal, the cunning ape, the prowling fox, the ranging bear, the relentless tiger, and every beast of the forest that roars after its prey-all lay in the depths of the wood, unnoticed and unknown, while the sun was high in the heavens. But winter

has come, and the beasts of the earth gather round the hewn-down stump.

In the first awakenings of the soul we do not usually know nor feel much of our fallen nature. We look too much to the branches, and not enough to the root; taste the bitterness of the stream more than that of the fountain, and are more engaged with the statue than the hole of the pit whence it was digged. We feel more the guilt of sin committed than of sin indwelling, and think more of the daily coin that passes through our hands than of the mint-the evil treasure of our evil heart-which stamps it with its image and superscription. Caesar's penny denoted Caesar's power, though those who boasted they never were in bondage to any man, saw not that the money which circulated among them carried with it a proof of his dominion over them. Nor do we see at first very clearly that the sin which stamps every action has the image of Adam engraved upon it. Still less do we know much about sin in the days of spiritual prosperity. The good treasure of the good heart is then circulating its gold, stamped with Christ's image. But when the day of adversity comes, and beggary and bankruptcy ensue, and the evil treasure again issues forth, we begin to look at the die, and feel-bitterly and painfully feel-that every word, look, thought, desire and imagination, as they pass through the heart, are immediately seized, cast under the press, and come forth bearing sin's coinage upon them. This bank never breaks, this die never wears out, but fresh coin is issued as fast as the old disappears. Guilt, indeed, and a tender conscience would fain stop this circulation, but they can do little else than stand by and count, with sighs and groans and bitter lamentations, the incomings and outgoings of sin's exchequer.

But what are the effects of these trying dispensations? Such as could be produced in no other way. Whatever wonderful effects are ascribed to the letter of the Word, in this Bible-spreading and Bible-reading day, one thing is certain, that it is utterly inadequate to produce in the soul the fruits and graces of the Spirit. Humility, repentance, filial fear, self-loathing, simplicity and godly sincerity, brokenness of heart, contrition of spirit, meekness, patience, deadness to the world, spiritual discernment, boldness and faithfulness in the cause of truth, an open heart and an open hand-such and similar Divine fruits cannot be gathered out of the Bible as a man picks hips and haws off a hedge. The notions of them may; and in this day, notions and opinions, doctrines and sentiments, creeds and articles, ceremonies and ordinances, cant and whine, superstition and self-righteousness, formality and tradition, have usurped the place of vital godliness. But the reality, the power, the life, the inbeing, the feeling, the experience, in a word, the spiritual possession of these gracious fruits must be wrought into the soul; made, as it were, part and parcel of it, be the blood that circulates through its veins, the meat it eats, the water it drinks, and the clothing it wears. Now this the letter of the word never has done, and never can do. A peculiar experience must be passed through; and by means of this spiritual experience alone are these divine effects wrought. Thus the fair tree that shot up its boughs to heaven being pruned down to a stump, and the abandoning of it to the fowls of the mountains and to the beasts of the earth, teaches the soul:

1. Humility. Humility is not obtained by reading texts, and turning over parallel passages which speak of it, but by having something in ourselves, discovered to us in a spiritual way, to be humble for. Thus a man who stands as a forsaken stump of what he was, and has the devil to harass him all the summer, and his own vile heart to plague him all the winter, has something in himself to make him humble. Humility is forced, beaten, driven into him; he is made humble, whether he will or not, and is compelled by sheer necessity to take the lowest room.

These cutting dispensations teach him:

2. His helplessness. A man does not learn that he is a helpless creature by reading Ro 5:6, as he does not learn that his heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked by reading Jer 17:9. A Chelsea pensioner, with both his arms shot off, or a man bed-ridden with the palsy, wants nobody to tell him how helpless he is. It is his daily, hourly, momentarily experience. Every time he wishes to eat, drink or stir, his helplessness is forced upon him by bitter experience. He cannot deny it, evade it, or escape from it. Thus a man who has had all his natural religion cut down to the ground, and the branches thereof taken away, and burnt before his eyes, needs no one to preach to him "the duty of helplessness". The fowls of the mountains come flocking down; he has no arms to drive them away. The beasts of the earth gather around him; he is palsied, and is forced to lay his body as the street for them to pass over.

From these mysterious dealings he learns:

3. Self-loathing. He cannot be a peacock Pharisee, spreading out in the sun the feathers of good works. He has something to loathe himself for. We cannot hate others without a cause of hatred. Nor can we feel hatred of ourselves, unless there is something in self to hate. A man who falls into a stinking puddle hates his clothes because he loves cleanliness. Thus he who has a holy principle in his heart must needs hate sin. Our modern professors hate other people's sins, but love their own. But a child of God hates himself as being so filthy and polluted before Him whom he loves. He hates the fowls that brood over him with their obscene wings and dismal croakings. He hates the beasts that roar about him for food, and grudge if they be not satisfied. And above all he hates himself, as the wretched stump to which these unclean animals resort.

It would not be difficult to show how patience, meekness, contrition of spirit, tenderness of conscience, and other similar graces are produced in the soul by this dark experience, which every prating fool whom presumption has stuck up in a pulpit has a bolt to shoot at.

But I hasten to an effect that I cannot pass over, and that is, that it produces a case for the Divine Redeemer in which to manifest His power, glory and salvation. With all the great swelling words about religion that are trumpeted through the land, and amongst the troops of professors that everywhere abound, there is scarcely one of a thousand who has a case that needs Christ's heavenly manifestations. They can all see, all hear, all believe, all rejoice, and I am sure they can all talk. They never had their natural religion stripped from them; never had clay smeared over their eyes Joh 9:6, nor the divine fingers put into their ears Mr 7:33, nor their wisdom turned into foolishness, nor their comeliness into corruption. But they say, We see, and therefore their sin remaineth. The light which is in them is darkness, and thus how great is that darkness!

A physician is useless without a case, and the deeper the case, the wiser and better physician we need. Thus a guilty conscience is a case for atoning blood, a wounded spirit for healing balm, a filthy garment for a justifying robe, a drowning wretch for an Almighty hand, a criminal on the gallows for a full pardon, an incurable disease for a heavenly Physician, and a sinner sinking into hell for a Saviour stooping down from heaven. A man with a real case must have a real salvation. He is no longer to be cheated, fobbed off, deluded and tricked with pretences, as a nervous patient is sometimes cured with bread pills; but he must have a real remedy as having a real disease. Christ in the Bible, Christ sitting as an unknown Saviour in the heavens, Christ afar off, unmanifested and unrevealed, is no Christ to him. "Near, near; let Him come near-in my heart, in my soul, revealed in me, manifested unto me, formed within me-this, this is the Christ I want. O for one drop of His atoning blood, one smile of His blessed countenance, one testimony of His love, one gleam of His justifying righteousness!"

And thus when this divine Redeemer appears in His garments stained with blood, the sinking soul hails His approach, the fowls of the mountains take flight, the beasts of the earth slink off to their dens, the dreary stump pushes forth its shoots, and the voice sounds forth from the inmost depths of the soul, "This is our God; we have waited for Him, and He will save us. This is the Lord, we have waited for Him; we will be glad and rejoice in His salvation".

And now comes that season to which all the preceding have been but preparatory and introductory-the Harvest of the soul. I do not understand by "the harvest" spoken of in the text the harvest at the end of the world Mt 13:39, the general ingathering of the elect from the four winds, from one end of the heaven to the other. But I understand by it a particular harvest; a harvest in the soul in time; not a harvest of both soul and body at the end of time. As there is a spring, a summer and a winter in experience, so is there a harvest in experience; and as one part of the text is experimental, so the other part is experimental also.

The peculiar mark of harvest is, that it is the season of fruit. And thus I consider the harvest of grace to consist in the production of fruit in the soul. The only fruit which God will ever acknowledge as such, is that which He Himself produces by His Spirit in the heart. "From Me is thy fruit found" Ho 14:8. "Working in you that which is well-pleasing in His sight" Heb 13:21. "We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained prepared, marg. that we should walk in them" Eph 2:10. "It is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure" Php 2:13. The market indeed is glutted with sloes and crabs. These are heaped up on every stall, and hawked about from door to door. But it is the fruit of the graft, not the fruit of the stock, that is worthy of the name, and none other will be put upon the heavenly table. The graft, however, would not bear till it was cut in. "Every branch that beareth fruit, He purgeth it"-that is, dresses and prunes it-"that it may bring forth more fruit" Joh 15:2.

The great secret of vital godliness is to be nothing, that Christ may be all in all. Every stripping, sifting, and emptying; every trial, exercise and temptation that the soul passes through, has but one object-to beat out of man's heart that cursed spirit of independence which the devil breathed into him when he said, "Ye shall be as gods". A man must well nigh be bled to death before this venom can be drained out of his veins. To cut down a giant into a babe a span long; to put a hunch-backed camel into a hydraulic press, and squeeze it into sufficient dimensions to pass through a needle's eye-this is the process needful to be undergone before a man can bring forth fruit unto God. Well might Nicodemus marvel how a man could enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born; and the wonder how a grown-up man becomes a helpless babe is as great a mystery to most now.

The fatal mistake of thousands is to offer unto God the fruits of the flesh instead of the fruits of the Spirit. Fleshly holiness, fleshly exertions, fleshly prayers, fleshly duties, fleshly forms, fleshly zeal-these are what men consider good works, and present them as such to God. But well may He "who is of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look on iniquity", say to all such fleshly workers, "If ye offer the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil? and if ye offer the lame and the sick, is it not evil?" Mal 1:8. All that the flesh can do is evil, for "every imagination of man's heart is only evil continually"; and to present the fruits of this filthy heart to the Lord of hosts is "to offer polluted bread upon His altar" Mal 1:7. Thus the "pleasant fruits, new and old" So 7:13, of which all manner are laid up at the gates of the righteous for the Beloved, are such only as the Spirit of God produces in the soul. And as He looketh not "on the outward appearance but the Lord looketh on the heart" 1Sa 16:7, so these fruits are not so much outward as inward fruits.

It is within, in the secret depths of the soul, that the eternal Spirit works; and the outward actions are but visible signs and manifestations of His inward operations. A broken heart, a contrite spirit, a tender

conscience, a filial fear, a desire to please, a dread to offend the great God of heaven, a sense of the evil of sin, and a desire to be delivered from its dominion, a mourning over our repeated backslidings, grief at being so often entangled in our lusts and passions, an acquaintance with our helplessness and weakness, a little simplicity and godly sincerity, a hanging upon grace for daily supplies, watching the hand of Providence, a singleness of eye to the glory of God-these are a few of the fruits that constitute the harvest of the soul. But why was it necessary that winter should precede? Why does the farmer break up the green sward with his plough, and turn in all the pretty daisies and cowslips, and lay bare the black soil, with all the hidden worms and maggots that lie concealed beneath the turf? Why does he drag his harrows over the fallows, and tear up the couchgrass, and gather it into heaps, and burn it to ashes? Because he wants a crop of corn to spring from seed which he himself sows, and because the natural produce of the land will not give him wheat and barley. Thus the violets and primroses of nature-the virtues of the natural heart, and all the flower of fleshly religion-must have the share of the winter plough pass beneath their roots, and be buried in mingled confusion beneath the black clods of inward corruption, that grace may spring up as an implanted crop.

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