

Winter Afore Harvest or the Soul's Growth in Grace - Part 4

by J.C. Philpot

The sermon explores the soul's growth in grace, highlighting the importance of brokenness, humility, and a deepening acquaintance with God.

Scripture: Exodus 33:16, Job 31:23, Psalm 84:6, Ecclesiastes 1:18, Isaiah 18:5, Matthew 11:12, Romans 7:4

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Humility"

Description

J.C. Philpot preaches about the transformative journey of a believer's soul through trials and tribulations, leading to a deep reliance on Christ for all things, the crushing of pride and the growth of humility, the exposure of deceitful hearts and the establishment of spiritual integrity, the detection of hypocrisy and the cultivation of sincerity, and the destruction of empty religious forms in favor of true spiritual power.

Transcript

Isa 18:5,6

By the wintry dealings I have before attempted to describe, independence has been broken to pieces, and the soul brought to hang upon Christ for everything; pride has been cut down, and humility produced; a deceitful heart has been laid bare, and spiritual integrity created; hypocrisy has been detected and sincerity implanted; a form of religion has been crushed, and power set up in its stead; an empty profession of dry doctrine has been rooted up, and a realisation of eternal things been substituted; the reprobate silver has been burnt in the furnace, and the pure gold has come out uninjured. A burnt child dreads the fire, and a broken-down soul dreads an empty profession. A tender wound cannot bear pressure, and a conscience made tender by terrible things in righteousness cannot bear the burden of guilt. "By the reason of God's highness, it cannot endure" Job 31:23.

The things he has passed through have brought him into an acquaintance with God. He now knows the only true God and Jesus Christ whom He has sent; and he has felt that God is a Spirit, and must be worshipped in spirit and in truth. He can no longer endure the vain inventions of men, the formalities of a carnal Establishment, the mummeries of priestcraft, the canting whine of hypocrites, the empty babble of chattering professors, the mock holiness of Arminian perfectionists, and the cloak of religion which masks thousands of rotten hearts. He becomes a solitary character. He sets little store by loud prayers or long prayers, whether they come from the blind mill-horse in the pulpit, or his humble imitator in the pew. He

finds that a secret groan is better than a long prayer, a tear of contrition sweeter than an extempore form, and a few words with God in his closet more precious than many words at a prayer-meeting, even though deacons pray.

A line of Hart's hymns relieves his soul, when a noisy choir chanting Dr. Watts loads it with a burden; and half a verse of Scripture melts his heart, when a letter preacher with a long sermon hardens it into ice. He never leaves the company of empty professors without a load, or the sweet company of God without a blessing. He feels Christ to be his best Counsellor. His love most worth seeking, His friendship most enduring, His presence most cheering, and His smiles most to be desired. Men, even the very best of them, often only wound him; the company of God's children is often burdensome; and their advice usually an ineffectual help. His heavenly Friend never deceived him, never violated his confidence, disclosed his secrets, wounded his feelings, carnalised his mind, saddened his spirit, led him into error, or treated him with neglect. But on the contrary, 'pardons his sins, forgives his ingratitude, pities his infirmities, heals his backslidings, and loves him freely.

The Christian thus learns that if he stands, God must hold him up; if he knows anything aright, God must teach him; if he walks in the way to heaven, God must first put, and afterwards keep him in it; if he has anything, God must give it to him; and that if he does anything, God must work it in him. He now "through the law"-that is, through his experience of its killing sentence-"is become dead to the law, that he may live unto God". He can no longer take a killing letter for a living rule, but is deeply conscious that it is only by being "married to another, even to Him who is raised from the dead, that he can bring forth fruit unto God" Ro 7:4. Thus by the presence of God going with him, he becomes separated "from all the people that are upon the face of the earth" Ex 33:16.

Whilst others boast of what they have done for God, he is glad to feel that God has done something for him; whilst others are handling the shell, he is eating the kernel; whilst others are talking of Christ, he is talking with Him; whilst others are looking through the park palings, he is enjoying the estate; and whilst others are haranguing about the treasure in the Bank of England, he is pleased to find a few coins in his own pocket, stamped with the king's image and superscription. But he finds the truth of that text, "In much wisdom is much grief; and he that increaseth knowledge increases sorrow" Ec 1:18. As his inward religion separates him from those who have only an outward one, he becomes a butt for empty professors to shoot at. Those whom he once would have disdained to set with the dogs of his flock, now spare not to spit in his face Job 30:1 Job 30:10. Every consequential Evangelical, who has not an idea about religion but what he has gleaned from Scott or Simeon, condemns him as "a rank Antinomian". Every spruce Academic, hot from Hackney or Cheshunt, who knows no more about the operations of a living faith than of the Chinese language, has an arrow stored in his quiver, feathered with a text to strike him through the heart as "an awful character". Every high-faith professor rides over his head; every dry Calvinist outruns him in the race; every Pharisee outstrips him in zeal; every ranting Methodist thunders at him for sloth; and every doer of duty avoids him as a pestilence.

However various sects differ among themselves, they all unite in condemning him. All other religion is right, and his alone wrong; everyone else's faith is genuine, and his only is spurious. Of him alone the charitable augur uncharitably; universal salvationists cut off him alone from salvation; those that pity the heathen have no pity for him; and those who compass sea and land to make one proselyte, pronounce his case alone as past recovery. And what is his trespass and what is his sin, that they so hotly pursue after him? Ge 31:36. Does he live in sin? No. Is he buried in the world, head over ears in politics, heaping together dishonest gains, or eaten up with covetousness? None dare say so. Does he neglect prayer,

reading the Word, hearing the truth, contributing to the necessities of saints, and living peaceably with all men? No. Why then this universal baying at him from every dog of the pack? For the same reason that Joseph's brethren hated him, and could not speak peaceably unto him-the Father loves him, and has clothed him in a garment of many colours, and given him revelations which He has denied to them.

But he has sorrow, too, and opposition within, far more trying to his spirit than the evil names which malicious ignorance heaps upon him, or the unjust suspicions which Pharisaic pride harbours against him. Paul, after being caught up into the third heaven, had given to him a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet him, lest he should be exalted above measure 2Co 12:7. Go where he would, this thorn still accompanied him, rankling continually in his flesh, hampering every movement, inflicting unceasing pain, and piercing him deeper and deeper the more that he struggled against it. Ten thousand thorns in the hedge do not pain like one in the flesh. And thus ten thousand unjust suspicions of the sons of Belial, though they be "all of them as thorns thrust away, because they cannot be taken with hands; but the man that shall touch them must be fenced with iron and the staff of a spear" 2Sa 23:6,7 -ten thousand suspicions, I say, from vulture-eyed professors are but as thorns in the hedge, which only wound us when we go near them, and which a wise man will keep a due distance from. But a thorn in the flesh, driven and fastened in by the hand of God, we can neither ease nor extract.

And thus any one constant harassing temptation, which strikes into the soul of a child of God, will grieve and wound him a thousand times more deeply than a thick hedge of furze-bush professors standing by the roadside. But by these painful exercises he is kept from settling down on the lees of a dead assurance, or resting at his ease on the ground of a past experience. This rankling thorn preserves him from that vain, wretched, delusive establishment, falsely so-called, which, as a spreading gangrene, has infected well nigh whole churches with the dry rot-an establishment built upon length of profession, upon belief of the doctrines of grace, upon membership in a Particular Baptist Church, upon consistency of conduct, upon a general currency as a believer, upon freedom from doubts and fears, and upon an experience twenty years ago. His thorn in the flesh will not let him stand at ease, or ground his arms, as though the battle were won, the enemy vanquished, and the articles of peace signed. He cannot rest on doctrines, of which the power is not now felt; nor in a past experience, which is not continually renewed; nor in a Saviour in the Bible whose presence is not from time to time manifested; nor in promises, of which the sweetness is not occasionally enjoyed. He cannot thus cast anchor in the Dead Sea. He cannot lie stretched at his ease on this downy bed, for his thorn will not let him rest, but makes him "full of tossings to and fro unto the dawning of the day" Job 7:4.

Thus his establishment consists not in a head furnished with notions, but in a heart established with grace; not in an outward union with a church, but in an inward union with Christ; not in sitting down once a month to the ordinance, but in eating the bread which came down from heaven; not in having repented twenty years ago, but in being often melted by a sense of God's goodness and mercy; not in occupying a corner in an experimental chapel, but in having a place and a name in the church of the Firstborn. He will not indeed despise nor neglect any one of Christ's ordinances, but will look to the power more than to the form; and will think it sweeter to walk into the inner chambers of Zion's palace, and behold the King's face, than to go round about her, to tell her towers, and mark well her bulwarks.

Through the inward conflicts, secret workings, mysterious changes, and ever-varying exercises of his soul, he becomes established in a deep feeling of his own folly and God's wisdom, of his own weakness and Christ's strength, of his own sinfulness and the Lord's goodness, of his own backslidings and the Spirit's recoveries, of his own base ingratitude and Jehovah's longsuffering, of the aboundings of sin and the

super-aboundings of grace. He thus becomes daily more and more confirmed in the vanity of the creature, the utter helplessness of man, the deceitfulness and hypocrisy of the human heart, the sovereignty of distinguishing grace, the fewness of heaven-taught ministers, the scanty number of living souls, and the great rareness of true religion. Nor are these convictions borrowed ideas, floating opinions, crude, half-digested sentiments or articles of a creed, which may be right or may be wrong; but they are things known by him as certainly, and felt as evidently as any material object that his eye sees, or his hand touches.

He has a divine standard set up in his soul by which he measures others as well as himself, for "he that is spiritual judgeth all things" 1Co 2:15; and as he measures them with one hand, he is forced to stamp "Tekel" with the other. He looks into the granaries, and finds chaff stored instead of wheat; he holds up the notes to the light, and cannot discover the water-mark; he walks up to the fold, and sees goats penned instead of sheep; and visits the household to search for the family likeness, but finds it filled with the "sons of the sorceress, the seed of the adulterer and the whore" Isa 57:3. All he wants is reality. All that he is in search of is something which bears the divine impress, and carries with it a heavenly and supernatural character. But instead of finding widows "indeed and desolate" 1Ti 5:5, he is pestered with widows of Tekoa 2Sa 14:2; and instead of bankrupt debtors and insolvent prisoners, he encounters scarce any but wealthy merchants, with a flourishing trade and a stock in hand. His soul can, however, only unite with the poor and needy, the stripped and the emptied, the shipwrecked sailor and the shelterless wayfarer, who, from sheer necessity, from being driven out of house and home, have fled for refuge to the hope set before them in a salvation without money and without price.

And thus a little godly fear, a little living faith, a little groaning prayer, a little genuine repentance-in a word, a little heavenly reality, will kindle a union, when towering pretensions, unshaken confidence, ready utterance, a sanctified countenance, a whining cant, a gifted head, and a tongue that walketh through the earth, will freeze up every avenue of his heart. He has a needle in his soul which has been touched with a heavenly magnet; and the pole that a broken heart attracts, a brazen forehead repels.

Thus growth in grace is not progressive sanctification and fleshly holiness on the one hand, nor a false and delusive establishment on the other. The narrow path lies between these two extremes. On the one side is Seneh, and on the other side is Bozez 1Sa 14:4, Pharisaic holiness and Antinomian security, and between these two sharp rocks lies the path "which no fowl knoweth, and which the vulture's eye hath not seen" Job 28:7. From dashing on either of these rocks, a living man is kept only by the mysterious dealings of God with his spirit, and the internal exercises through which he continually passes. A constant acquaintance with his own vileness preserves him from a self-righteous holiness in the flesh; a daily cross and a rankling thorn keep him from careless presumption. His path is indeed a mysterious one, full of harmonious contradictions and heavenly paradoxes. He is never easy when at ease, nor without a burden when he has none. He is never satisfied without doing something, and yet is never satisfied with anything that he does. He is never so strong as when he sits still Isa 30:7, never so fruitful as when he does nothing, and never so active as when he makes the least haste Isa 28:16. All outstrip him in the race, yet he alone gains the goal, and wins the prize. All are sure of heaven but himself, yet he enters into the kingdom, whilst they are thrust out. He wins pardon through guilt, hope through despair, deliverance through temptation, comfort through affliction, and a robe of righteousness through filthy rags. Though a worm and no man, he overcomes Omnipotence itself through violence; and though less than vanity and nothing Isa 40:17 2Co 12:11, he takes heaven itself by force Mt 11:12.

Thus amidst the strange contradictions which meet in a believing heart, he is never so prayerful as when he says nothing; never so wise as when he is the greatest fool; never so much alone as when most in company; and never so much under the power of an inward religion as when most separated from an outward one. Strange mysterious creature! He cannot live without sinning, yet cannot live in sin; cannot live without prayer, and yet for days together cannot pray; continually finds religion a burden, yet would not part with it for the world; lusts after sin as a delicious morsel, yet hates it with a perfect hatred; esteems Christ the Chiefest among ten thousand, and yet is at times tried with doubts whether He is a Saviour at all.

Such, then, is the path, however feebly or imperfectly described, in which the redeemed walk Isa 35:9, a path trodden by them alone, and that too, often sorely contrary to their own inclinations. To walk in this path is not the product of wisdom Da 2:30, the effect of talent 1Co 2:6, nor the fruit of study. On the contrary, all that nature can do is to fight against it. Reason calls it folly, wisdom terms it madness, prudence considers it delusion, learning deems it enthusiasm, free-will counts it presumption, and self-righteousness thinks it licentiousness. Bishops and Archbishops despise it, Deans and Archdeacons abhor it, High Church clergy revile it, Low Church clergy preach against it, Bible and Missionary Societies cashier anyone the least tainted with it, and the devout and honourable expel it out of their coasts Ac 13:50. Graceless Calvinists abhor the sword whose keen edge gives them no quarter; Wesleyans revile the weapon that lays their proud fabric in the dust; worldly Dissenters hate the light that makes manifest their rotten foundation; preachers made at colleges and academies detest the voice which demands their divine commission; and formalists of all grades, sects, names and denominations loathe a religion which cuts them off from eternal life, and leaves them without the shadow of a hope. One thing is to them sufficiently clear: if this be the only way to heaven, they are not walking in it. This, at any rate, they have discernment enough to see; and thus, if they would justify themselves, they must necessarily condemn the way itself, the people who are walking in it, and the ministers who preach it.

But happy are those of us who, by an Almighty hand and a supernatural power, have been put into this blessed path! We neither placed ourselves in it at first, nor have kept ourselves in it afterwards. If we have done either, we are not in the way at all, but are walking in a side path, and shall end at that door which Bunyan saw to open into hell from the very gates of heaven. He that has no searchings of soul whether he is in the way, no chilling doubts nor sinking fears ever saddening his spirit, no secret groan nor sigh to have his heart right before God, no solemn midnight cries, no anxious prospects nor gloomy retrospects, no trembling apprehensions how it will be with him at the last, no dread of self-deceit, nor suspicions of Satan's delusions-he, I say, who glides securely on without these deep exercises, manifests by his very ease that he is not in the narrow path that leads to eternal life.

By one who is spiritually sincere every step will be more or less weighed, every experience sooner or later brought to the touchstone, and every part of the road anxiously tried. He will love to be searched through and through. He will uncover his bosom to every arrow that flies from the pulpit, to see if it be aimed at him. He will love a searching ministry, and in his right mind cannot be probed too deeply. He will hate the daubers with untempered mortar, and those who sew pillows to all armholes. He will love heart and conscience work, and cleave most to him who most "commends himself to every man's conscience in the sight of God". He desires to have his path traced out, his stumbling-blocks removed, his temptations entered into, and the dealings of God with his spirit described.

Though all condemn men of truth for bigotry and uncharitableness, he cannot think that to be a bad spirit which enters into the operations of the Holy Ghost, pulls down-false religion, tears away rotten props,

hunts out lying refuges, delivers souls from hypocrisy and delusion, gives to man all the shame, and ascribes to God all the glory. However hated they be and reviled, he cannot but love those who are blessed to the healing of his wounds, lifting off his burdens, comforting him in his afflictions, and delivering him out of his temptations. He cannot speak evil of that secret power which has accompanied the word to his heart, laid bare its inmost secrets, traced out its most hidden workings, discovered its deepest thoughts, and manifested to his astonishment what he believed none could know but God and himself. Hungry men do not throw bread into the kennel; sick men do not shut the door in the doctor's face; and prisoners do not strike the arm that sets them free. And thus you who are walking in this mysterious path will love the interpreters of your experience, the guides of your path, the breasts that give you suck, and the hand that ministers to you the bread of life.

But some will say, "Oh that I had a clear evidence I was walking in this path! What would I not give to have a divine testimony that the blessed Spirit was leading me in it!" It is through these very doubts that the evidence is obtained. Doubts lead to cries and groans after a divine testimony; and in answer to these cries the heavenly witness is given. A man without doubts is without testimonies. Doubts are to testimonies what the mortise is to the tenon, the lock to the key, the enigma to the solution. Testimonies are Ebenezers, "stones of help" 1Sa 7:12, marg.; but the stone must have a hole dug for it to stand in, and that hole is doubt. Doubts of salvation are to manifestations of salvation what hunger is to food, nakedness to clothing, a thunderstorm to a shelter, a gallows to a reprieve, and death to a resurrection. The one of these things precedes, prepares and opens a way for the other. The first is nothing without the last, nor the last without the first.

Thus, next to testimonies, the best thing is spiritual doubts. To know we are right is the best thing; to fear we are wrong is the second best. To enjoy the witness of the Spirit is the most blessed thing this side of the grave; to pant after that enjoyment is the next greatest blessing. I am speaking, mind, only of spiritual doubts; that is, doubts in a spiritual man, for natural doubts are as far from salvation as natural hopes. The path through the valley of Baca is "from strength to strength"; that is, according to the eastern mode of travelling, from one halting place to another, where wells are dug, and "the rain also filleth the pools" Ps 84:6,7. We do not learn either God or ourselves, sin or salvation, in a day.

The question is, Have we set one step in the way? "Watchman, what of the night?" Is it even, midnight, cock-crowing or morning? Mr 13:35. Is it spring, summer, winter or harvest? The question is not so much whether you have much faith, but whether you have any. It is not quantity, but quality; not whether you have a very great religion, but whether you have any at all. A grain of true faith will save the soul; and I have known many, many seasons when I should be glad to feel certain that I had the thousandth part of a grain. A grain of mustard seed is the smallest of all seeds; and even faith as small as that can move mountains. Have I described any part of your experience, found the least echo in your bosom, unravelled one divine secret of your heart, or touched one heavenly string in your soul? Happy is he that has one divine testimony to his eternal interest in the electing love of the Father, in the atoning blood and justifying righteousness of the Son, and in the divine teachings of the Holy Spirit.

But I solemnly assure everyone who has ears to hear, that this path is the only way of salvation; and that every one who at the great day shall be found not to have walked in it will fall into the hands of Him who is a consuming fire; and will sink into hell, to lie for ever beneath His avenging frown.

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