

THE FRUITFUL FIELD

SERMON

by

Mr J K POPHAM

preached at Galeed Chapel, Brighton on Friday evening 6th July 1923.

Text: Isaiah 32 v 15

Until the Spirit be poured upon us from on high, and the wilderness be a fruitful field, and the fruitful field be counted for a forest.¹

The religion which the Holy Ghost gives to all His people is vital. It is progressive - not progressive in the sense of progressive sanctification, in the sense of the old man becoming a new man, in the sense of our passions ceasing, our sinful thoughts growing holy, but progressive in the true gospel-sense of a sinner, a child of God, born again, taking root downward and bearing fruit upward, taking deeper and firmer hold by faith, as the root of a tree takes firmer hold and deeper in the ground in which it stands, and therefore bears more fruit. In this sense I use the word 'progressive' with regard to the life of God in the soul by the Holy Ghost.

Doubtless every observing child of God here, who has been for any length of time in the ways of God, will have observed again and again that there have been motions of light in his heart, convictions, apprehensions by faith of God the Father and of Christ, which formerly he was a stranger to. When you light a fire there is a good deal of smoke; there is a good deal of crackling and of flame. When the fire becomes more fire, that is to say, is consolidated, there is less smoke, less noise, less flame, more heat; and when it pleases God the Spirit to work (and it does please Him to work in the saints "both to will and to do of His good pleasure" (Phil. 2 v. 13)) there is what Peter calls a "growing in grace;"² not growing in intellectual knowledge, though there may be that in some cases - doubtless there is - but a growing in grace, rooting in grace. The fruit fibres of faith, if one may speak so, will strike more deeply into the Person and work of Christ, whereby sin will become more bitter, Christ more precious. Sin will be more utterly and freely and sincerely confessed, with more fervent desires to forsake it; and Christ will be apprehended as possessing all "the fulness of the Godhead bodily" (Col. 2 v. 9), all the love and the grace of God, given to Him for the church before the world began; and the longing of the soul will be to draw from that fulness those supplies which are necessary for the maintenance of the life of God, and for the bearing of fruit to the praise and glory of God. And I am disposed to say that this is the only true, proper cause of those complaints which the child of God, when lively, makes of himself, as growing a bigger sinner and more and more unworthy of God's notice. It is from this growth of grace that sin becomes more bitter, the world more and more empty to the

¹ The chapter read at this service was Hebrews 6.

² "But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3 v. 18).

sinner, and God greater, more dreadful to his nature, more wonderful in His grace, more attractive in His Son, Jesus Christ. And it is in connection with the latter part of the text, which I could barely name last Lord's Day, that I have made these observations.

"And the fruitful field be counted for a forest," more now than in days past. How it affects you, I do not know; I know how it affects me, how convinced I am of my absolute necessity for the Spirit of God to work in me, both to will and to do of His good pleasure, and to be in me according to that promise in Zechariah, "the Spirit of grace and of supplications," that I may look upon Him whom I have pierced and mourn for Him as for an only son.³ I can but believe that you who are rightly exercised want, desire, and ask for a true growth in grace; and I may tell you of one wish that moved me as I was walking here this evening, for you and for myself: this namely, that we might have a good time, but that we might not be satisfied with a good time; that it might abide with us, and move us powerfully to seek a continuance and an increase in those graces which God has put in Christ, and which the Spirit is sent to reveal and put into the hearts of His people. It is good to have a good hearing; it is good to get reprov'd; it is good when a minister, without knowing the case, makes people see their faults and their shortcomings. I am thankful that sometimes I have been the means of making some of you know something of where you have been. It is good to have inklings of God, of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Ghost; good - and better, if one may speak so - when these things, instead of dying away, as frequently they have done, rise up as a well, a spring of living desire, of fervent prayer, causing the subject of them to say, "Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after" (Phil. 3 v. 12). Paul had a great aim when he said he followed after, if he might apprehend that for which he was apprehended of Christ.⁴ He knew he was called by grace, as you may know you are called by grace. You may feel enabled to follow Paul in his word to the Corinthians: "Ye see your calling, brethren" (1 Cor. 1 v. 26). You know God has blessed you at times, but what a mercy it is to be enabled to say, 'Now I want to know and follow after, that I may know why Christ has apprehended me. He has apprehended me and I want to know why.' 'Oh,' one may say "I know why, that He might display His grace," and that is perfectly true. But then the displaying of grace is carried on by the Eternal Spirit in fresh discoveries of the Person and the glory of Christ in all His believing people. So I would, as helped this evening, desire to draw your attention to the "fruitful field."

Just to repeat a little of what was said on Lord's Day: that the fruitful field is fruitful first because the seed of God is sown there. The good ground received the good seed. It had been ploughed, turned over, cultivated, that is, by the Lord. "Ye are God's husbandry" (1 Cor. 3 v. 9). It had brought forth fruit, in some thirty, in some sixty, in some an hundred fold,⁵ and this good seed brought forth fruit; faith, love, peace, joy in the Holy Ghost, gentleness, humility, and all those graces which are spoken of in the Scripture.⁶ This is a fruitful field. Fruit is brought forth with patience, as the Lord speaks,⁷ the fruit of faith cleaving to, following after, the Lord Jesus, after "the full assurance of understanding" (Col. 2 v. 2), after the sealing of the Spirit and the earnest of the Spirit. It is a great thing to have a fruitful field

³ "I will pour upon the house of David ... the spirit of grace and of supplications; and they shall look upon Me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for Him, as one mourneth for his only son" (Zech. 12 v. 10).

⁴ "I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus."

⁵ See Mat. 13 v. 4-8, 19-23; Mark 4 v. 3-8, 14-20; Luke 8 v. 5-8, 11-5

⁶ "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance" (Gal. 5 v. 22-3); "Be clothed with humility" (1 Pet. 5 v. 5).

⁷ "But that on the good ground are they, which ... having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience" (Luke 8 v. 15).

within you. My brethren, if you have these fruits, may you be enabled to bless God for them. It is not humility to say you have them not, if you have them, and realise in any measure that you have them. It is not humility to say that you have nothing but enmity, if you have love - to say it from a fear, a false fear. Now where this fruitful field is there will be, as I have said, a desire to have more, a real desire to know more of Him whom to know - that is, His dearly beloved Son whom He sent - is life eternal.⁸

In the solemn chapter which I read, the Apostle speaks of going on unto perfection, which does not mean progressive sanctification in the flesh, but leaving behind those things, these rudiments of which the Spirit there speaks. He says "Let us go on unto perfection" (Heb. 6 v. 1), and this we will do if God permit. And that perfection appears to be set forth by the Apostle Paul when writing to the Ephesians concerning the ministry and the great use of the ministry in the Church. He says "till we all come in the unity of the faith" (Eph. 4 v. 13), unto the perfect stature of a man in Christ Jesus.⁹ Perfection cannot be meant in an absolute sense, for there is no man that knows God so much here as to be incapable of knowing more of Him. There is no child of God who has as much communion with God as makes it impossible to have more, who has so much intimacy with Jesus Christ as to make it impossible that he should have more. If our faith has a little looked into the mystery of Christ, how much has it discovered comparatively? How little has it discovered! Still, if there is a fruitful field, bless God for it. Thank Him and take courage. If faith bears fruit in you in cleaving to Christ, thank God for it. All His works praise Him. His saints are to bless Him.

Now this forest, this extension, this Carmel, this cultivated garden, watered - it may frighten some of you; it may alarm you; it does me! But I would look at that to which I have not attained, and may you look at it, look at it again and again - that to which you have not attained. Now I call it fruit in a soul when a person can say, 'I have seen by faith the Lord Jesus; I have seen Him. Everything that I need, that I can desire, I have seen Him to be a representative of, and have panted to know that He was my representative. I have seen Him on the cross making atonement, and I have longed to know that He made an atonement for me. I have seen Him rising from the dead and ascending into heaven, interceding there, and I have longed to know that He ascended in my behalf, in my interests, and that He intercedes for me; that for me He prays as He did for Peter, that my faith, so little, so often damped, so crippled, so apparently paralysed sometimes by sin, may not fail.' I should say that a person who can thus speak before God has fruit; the garden is not all weeds; it is not all rank and neglected; it has fruit in it. God has caused it to be dug and dunged, and the good seed sown in it bears that fruit, thirty fold, shall one say. Can you come here, my brethren? Can you come here? Can you say to your brethren sometimes, 'Oh come, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker; let us worship, because He has done this great thing for me - made of me, an infidel by nature, a God hating person, turning my back always on Him and my face to the world and death and hell - He has made of me a broken hearted believer, and I want to know and be found in the Lord Jesus. I should say if that sinner died tonight he would go to heaven. The dying thief went straight from the cross to heaven, and every sinner believing in the Lord Jesus with all his heart, and making confession unto salvation, is infallibly safe. God's word is faithful. If such a person sank into hell, God's promise would be broken; but if such a person lives long, if he is exercised well, if he is under the discipline

⁸ "And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent" (John 17 v. 3).

⁹ "unity of the faith, ... unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.

of the Spirit, if he is cultivated, if he is, as the Lord speaks by Paul to the Corinthians, "God's husbandry," surely he won't be, at the end of ever so many seasons, what he is just as I have spoken. There will be a growth, will there not? He will say later on, 'I knew Him then a little; now I believe I know Him a little more.'

Let us notice what Paul says to the Colossians; writing to them of his work as a minister, he speaks of Christ thus; "Whom we preach." He says that he is a minister to make known the mystery of God, "the mystery which hath been hidden from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints, ... which is Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col. 1 v. 26-8). That is a great attainment, to have had such a knowledge of Christ given to you as to perceive in your very heart that His Name, His Person, His blood, His righteousness are there as your hope: hope of life; hope of getting through honourably, hope of being received in heaven, hope of eternal glory there. That is a great thing, and one might say 'Well surely, when a person attains to that, what need is there for more?' Oh, follow what Paul says to the same people in a verse or two afterwards. He says, "I would that ye knew what great conflict I have for you", what care, what solicitude is in my spirit for you "and for them at Laodicea, ... that their hearts might be comforted, being knit together in love, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the acknowledgement of the mystery of God, and of the Father and of Christ, in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2 v. 1-3).

Now let us go back to that: Christ is in a sinner the hope of glory, to bring him to that Scripture just quoted, and so now, have you had a manifestation of the Trinity? Have you seen the glory of God the Holy Ghost who is placed first in that passage - "to the acknowledgement of God, and of the Father and of Christ?" Have you, in the light of that wondrous teacher, teaching you, seen the Lord Jesus Christ in more of His fulness, of His glory, of His beauty, so that His fruit has been excellent and comely for you; that you have looked on Him, have "sat down under His shadow with great delight," and found His fruit sweet to your taste (Song 2 v. 3)? And have you seen the Father? Philip knew Christ, but did not apprehend that the Father was in Christ till Christ told him, "He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father" (John 14 v. 9). There is then, as I apprehend, a growth in the knowledge of the Trinity; a growth in the knowledge of the Trinity so as that the person who grows comes to the heartfelt acknowledgement of the Trinity, of the Spirit, of the Son and of the Father; and this not merely intellectually, not merely because it is in the Bible, but because in his own soul he has had some apprehension of this incomprehensible mystery, and has seen to his great humbling, to his deep astonishment and to the melting of his spirit, that blessed Jehovah manifested in Christ, and has been gathered up, so gathered up in his spirit by faith, as to feel he could say with the Apostle these great words (they are very great words): "Yea, doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord" (Phil. 3 v. 8), "in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."

Did you ever put it to yourself as a searching question, looking around upon what you have had, things dear to you, very dear, lying in your heart, holding you in your tenderest affections, and felt, as in the sight of a heart searching God, that you could say of them, "I count them but loss." I wonder if you have sometimes hesitated to sing the words which are sometimes sung here:

"Is there a thing beneath the sun,
That strives with Thee my heart to share?
Ah, tear it thence, and reign alone,
And govern every motion there."

(C. Wesley; Gadsby's Sel. 1075)

I do not say this as being a sentiment, but a life, a light, an unction, a power, a wondrous power in the soul, that divides between nature and grace, between God and nature, between Christ and nature; between Christ, as having durable riches and righteousness, and all those riches that we have here, rich possessions in fruits, and other things. And when we can see it, does not it seem like a fruitful field extending?

Then take that passage in Ephesians where the Apostle writes to them and prays for them, bending his knees to the God and Father of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that God would grant unto them to know Christ more, and says he, "To know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge;" "that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith" (Eph. 3 v. 19, 17) and so on. Now this seems to me to lead us further than that beginning. The beginning is wonderful; oh, I would not utter a syllable if I could help it knowingly, to some, even to belittle the beginning; the beginning is wonderful, glorious. God is glorified in it; but then the Apostle prays for them in whom that was, in whom it had been carried on, that blessed beginning; and he says, Now I pray that He in whom your hope is, He of whom you have enjoyed, from whom you have had access to the Father, by whom you have found comfort and peace and joy, that He may dwell in your hearts, and that His incomprehensible love may be comprehended by you - the length and breadth and depth and height of it. How far have we been carried in that love? How high have we been raised in that love? How deep have we sunk into that love? How have we walked in that love abroad, saying that it was wider than our wanderings from God, deeper than our guilt, longer than our life of sin, higher than our highest hopes? Now if the Lord should lead us a little into that, so that we could say we know more than we ever thought we should know of Christ, it is a great thing.

Take some things belonging to Him in this connection. Take His wondrous Person as the representative of His people before God; when that grows and is powerful in us, what an effect it has on us! And we seek to come before, and worship, God. How often through unbelief and a legal heart one trembles at the thought of praying, on the ground of the sin that is constantly moving and frequently prevailing in one. How often the majesty of God may strike a terror into the heart! How the omniscience of God, seeing us altogether as we are, through and through, may make us afraid, because we see something of the awful hypocrisy of our nature! But if the Holy Ghost says you have a representative, He is seen instead of you, the Man who is God's fellow at His right-hand, who is perfect in His person, perfect in His representation, perfectly accepted of His Father, so that in Him you stand, as the Son stands; you are as your representative is; you do what He does. Oh, if this be revealed by the Eternal Spirit there is a growth. Legality gets a blow; unbelief is not put to shame but it is made silent, and faith is greatly encouraged. It is a great thing to see by faith a perfect representative; one whose representation of His people is so perfect that, though they tremble to pray often, though they fear, yet the moment they see this representative, Jesus Christ, their faith grows bold, and they can even say each for himself, "I can no denial take."¹⁰ "I will not let Thee go, except Thou bless me" (Gen. 32 v. 26).

Take His perfect atonement. Oh, if the Spirit should from time to time, and more and more, reveal to us the wondrous value, the infinite worth to God, of the death of Christ; how that the death of Christ had, in the first place, respect to God; that, in offering Himself without spot to God, Christ looked at the Father first of all; He stood there, atoning,

¹⁰ "Tis thy goodness makes me bold;
I can no denial take
When I plead for Jesus' sake" (Medley, Gadsby's Sel. 377)

labouring, sweating, praying, pouring out His soul unto death, in order to satisfy absolutely the justice of God, the vindicatory justice of God; to give ample satisfaction to the holiness of God; to give infinite delight to the justice of God, and to give a vent, that shall never be closed or hindered, to the love of God. If this be seen by faith as being in the atonement, it is more than just the putting away of sin. It is making a sinner so acceptable as that he stands in that atonement as if he had never sinned. It is difficult to apprehend - impossible without the Spirit's testimony of it in your heart. Literally, theologically, a man may hold it and his heart remain hard and his mind obdurate, and his whole life and soul dead and wicked. But, oh, if the Spirit reveals it, it is different; it is seen in the divine glory; it is seen in something of its eternal sufficiency, and the sinner casts his hope there, and enters into what we read just now: "Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which entereth into that within the veil; whither the forerunner is for us entered, even Jesus, made an high priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec" (Heb. 6 v. 19-20).

Oh, what a sight! Trembling soul, with the fruit of faith in you now, this lies before you, if you have not already attained to it. It is a view, at the present perhaps apparently impossible for you to think can ever be given you, a power that you may think now you never can feel. Oh but the Spirit, when poured upon you from on high in this particular thing, to bring it to you, to incorporate it into your very experience, to make it your life and your peace, your joy and your strength, to make it everything to you so as that in a proper manner you may say, 'Though I be so vile in myself, in God's sight, in the atonement, I am without sin!' And this explains those sweet passages in the Song where Christ tells His bride that she is without spot, pure. "There is no spot in thee" (Song 4 v. 7); and those places where Paul speaks of the church being unreprouvable and unrebukeable in the sight of God.¹¹ Not in her own sight! Which of you could lay your hand on an hour of this day, yea, five minutes, and say, 'Now I did not sin then'? As long as there is a sinful nature in us, so long will that nature be moving and breathing. As you could not say of a living man that there was one single consecutive minute, sixty seconds, in which his heart ceased to beat, so you can say there is no child of God can be without sin while he lives here; and he does sin, yet faith apprehending the atonement in the sweet light of the Spirit, realising the perfection of that, how every attribute of God is honoured by that, that every need of the soul is met by that, that every desire of the heart is answered by that - oh, this kills the legality from time to time, and brings the soul to bear fruit of faith, and it seems as if that comes in where the Apostle says "Rejoice in the Lord always; and again I say, Rejoice" (Phil. 4 v. 4). 'What, rejoice,' one may say, 'how can I? Though I hope in God's mercy, how can I rejoice with this body of sin and death?' Well, the Holy Ghost can tell you how, and accomplish it in you. He can tell you how you may rejoice and be ashamed, and sing in your very heart;¹² tell you how the Apostle reached his victory when, having said "Oh wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" he said "I thank God through Jesus Christ" (Rom. 7 v. 24), not, 'I thank God that I have at this moment lost it,' but 'I thank God through Jesus Christ that I shall one day lose it and even here I shall get victories through Jesus Christ.'

And let us take one other thing only, namely, the love of God, that sovereign love that is in Him an attribute, not a passion attracted and repelled according to the comeliness or otherwise of an object, but that attribute of God fixed on sinners, fixed on some here, as they know it and have felt it: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his

¹¹ "...to present you holy and unblameable and unreprouvable in his sight" (Col. 1 v. 22)

¹² "A sinner may repent and sing,
Rejoice and be ashamed" (J Hart; Gadsby's Sel. 241).

life for his friends" (John 15 v. 13). But how wonderful: as the Lord's people go on, they may be led by the Spirit to trace love, not only in occasional visits of love to their souls, but in all the dealings of a loving God with them. You may see that it has spread its wings of light over your whole life; that it has ordered the most untoward things for your good; has controlled sin for your good; has sent trouble and reproof and rebuke and affliction and frowns and clouds in order to display itself in your case, in order that you might come honourably through your difficulties to your grave, and go to gaze on love's object and love's manifestation and love's glory through eternity. Patient love, powerful love, faithful love; love that has ever considered the good of its objects! This love, love in the Father given to the Son; love in the Son, giving Him wings to fly from the throne to the cross; love in the Spirit moving Him to come into the most wicked hearts that ever beat, the most sinful persons that ever lived; this eternal three-fold cord, this wonderful love of God opened by the Spirit, spread out by the Spirit in its various manifestations before your wondering eyes, will make of your heart a very extensive garden, cultivated and made fruitful. Has this anything like the sixty-fold and the hundred-fold measure of fruitfulness? Might it please God to give it to us, because there is no offence here? Is it not lack of love in us when we are offended with some providential dealings of God with us? Is it not lack of love when some child of God with a crooked disposition and some uncomely words offends us, and we are apt to say, even if we hope to spend eternity with them, we want to have little or nothing to do with them here? Oh, but if love spreads itself over us, if it is like a flood sometimes just covering us, bathing us, softening, sanctifying, humbling, and blessing us, what a change! There it was, a living thing, yet very cramped, scarcely able to exercise itself on its only proper object, and now, how different! It just fills you and you enter a little into that, "Ye are taught of God to love one another" yea, and also to love Jesus Christ at thy worst, as Erskine says,

"Whate'er thou found'st Him at thy best,
He's at thy worst the same." (Gospel Sonnets p. 156)

- and even when He seems to be at the worst with you, when frowns instead of smiles come to you, even then not to be offended in Him. He apparently neglected John the Baptist, let him be put into prison and remain there, sending him neither message nor comfort, not letting him know that His Saviour understood all his case, until John's natural patience was worn out and his faith was wavering, so that he sent two of his disciples with that penetrating question, "Art Thou He that should come or look we for another." You remember the message that Christ sent back. "Go your way, and tell John what things ye have seen and heard ... and blessed is he whosoever shall not be offended in Me" (Luke 7 v. 19-23).

There is another important word which I will name here, where Christ, having taught His disciples various things, said this: "Let these sayings sink down into your ears; for the Son of Man shall be delivered into the hands of men" (Luke 9 v. 44); as if He should teach them this: now let what I have said be with you; you believe in Me now, but the day is coming when I shall be delivered into the hands of men, when wicked men shall take Me and crucify Me, and then you will want all your faith, you will want all your love, you will want all your confidence. Now you may be ready to say, 'We will die with Thee, Lord.' One said 'I will go to prison with Thee';¹³ "Though I should die with Thee, yet will I not deny Thee" (Mat. 26 v. 25). Oh, but Christ was right as always. "Let these sayings sink down into your ears." Now when they do, and when they have a good effect upon us, then there is a growth of

¹³ "He said unto him, Lord, I am ready to go with thee, both into prison, and to death" (Luke 22 v. 33).

fruitfulness, a real extension of spiritual knowledge and experience.

"And the fruitful field shall be counted for a forest," extending on the right-hand and on the left, Carmel, a beautiful, cultivated place; high, yet cultivated. So shall be the child of God, as the Holy Ghost is in him. "Until the Spirit be poured upon us from on high," all is barrenness, all is death. Every sign of the fall, briars and thorns and lean creatures occupying every place, as a cage full of unclean birds, so is the heart of man until the Spirit be poured upon him from on high and then that wilderness becomes a fruitful field; and as grace goes on, as the Spirit carries on His divine work and accomplishes God's heavenly purposes in the heart, the fruitful field extends itself.

May I say, in conclusion, this: if there be children here, children in the church of the living God (the mystical church I mean) who may be saying, 'Well, but all this leaves us behind,' then may I say to you: wait on the Holy Ghost, and do not try to grow yourselves. Do not cultivate yourselves. Read the Scriptures diligently; pray over them as you can. Attend to all those means God puts within your reach, but do not cultivate yourselves. If you do, weeds, briars, thorns, will multiply, and lean creatures will fill the forts and towers. There will be nothing but sin grow out of your own efforts. But if the Lord gives you grace and patience to bring forth fruit, there will be a growth. Young men, they may think if they met with a father in the church, 'Well, we are nothing at all.' What foolishness, is it not? Yet what young man has not committed such folly? Why, reading *Warburton's Mercies* all but killed me when I was young, through my ignorance and foolishness. Young men grow; they grow because the blessed Holy Ghost makes them grow. He cultivates them; He takes care of them; and I like people to speak just as they are in grace. It is not seemly for a child to talk like a father; it is good just to go on as God teaches and leads you. Says the Apostle to the Philippians, "Nevertheless, whereto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule; let us mind the same things" (Phil. 3 v. 16). Only may the Holy Ghost set this before us, that there is intended in the Lord's great purposes such a thing as growth, growth in grace by taking root downward, and then a consequent bearing fruit upward; and may we come into an experience of it.

Amen.

LIBRARY OF THE
GOSPEL STANDARD BAPTISTS