

EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS
ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE,

And many Explanatory Notes.

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MDCCCLIX.

MARK IV. 1–20.

1 And he began again to teach by the sea side: and there was gathered unto him a great multitude, so that he entered into a ship, and sat in the sea; and the whole multitude was by the sea on the land.

2 And he taught them many things by parables, and said unto them in his doctrine,

3 Hearken; Behold, there went out a sower to sow:

4 And it came to pass, as he sowed, some fell by the way side, and the fowls of the air came and devoured it up.

5 And some fell on stony ground, where it had not much earth; and immediately it sprang up, because it had no depth of earth:

6 But when the sun was up, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away.

7 And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up, and choked it, and it yielded no fruit.

8 And other fell on good ground, and did yield fruit that sprang up and increased; and brought forth, some thirty, and some sixty, and some an hundred.

9 And he said unto them, He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.

10 And when he was alone, they that were about him with the twelve asked of him the parable.

11 And he said unto them, Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God: but unto them that are without, all *these* things are done in parables:

12 That seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest at any time they should be converted, and *their* sins should be forgiven them.

13 And he said unto them, Know ye not this parable? and how then will ye know all parables?

14 The sower soweth the word.

15 And these are they by the way side, where the word is sown; but when they have heard, Satan cometh immediately, and taketh away the word that was sown in their hearts.

16 And these are they likewise which are sown on stony ground; who, when they have heard the word, immediately receive it with gladness;

17 And have no root in themselves, and so endure but for a time: afterward, when affliction or persecution ariseth for the word's sake, immediately they are offended.

18 And these are they which are sown among thorns; such as hear the word,

19 And the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful.

20 And these are they which are sown on good ground; such as hear the word, and receive *it*, and bring forth fruit, some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some an hundred.

THESE verses contain the parable of the sower. Of all the parables spoken by our Lord, none is probably so well-known as this. There is none which is so easily understood by all, from the gracious familiarity of the figures which it contains.¹ There is none which is of such universal and

¹ “Our Saviour borroweth his comparisons from easy and familiar things, such as the sower, the seed, the ground, the growth, the withering, the answering or failing of the sower's expectations, all of them things well known, and by all these would teach us some spiritual instruction. For there is no earthly thing, which is not fitted to put us in mind of some heavenly. Christ cannot look upon the sun, the wind, fire, water, a hen, a little grain of mustard seed,—nor upon ordinary occasions, as the penny given for the day's work, the wedding garment and ceremonies of the Jews about it, nor the waiting of servants at their master's table, or children asking bread and fish at their father's table, but he applies all to some special use of edification in grace.

perpetual application. So long as there is a Church of Christ and a congregation of Christians, so long there will be employment for this parable.

The language of the parable requires no explanation. To use the words of an ancient writer, “it needs application, not exposition.” Let us now see what it teaches.

We are taught, in the first place, *that there are some hearers of the Gospel, whose hearts are like the way-side in a field.*

These are they who hear sermons, but pay no attention to them. They go to a place of worship, for form, or fashion, or to appear respectable before men. But they take no interest whatever in the preaching. It seems to them a mere matter of words, and names, and unintelligible talk. It is neither money, nor meat, nor drink, nor clothes, nor company;—and as they sit under the sound if it, they are taken up with thinking of other things. It matters nothing whether it is law or Gospel. It produces no more effect on them than water on a stone. And at the end they go away, knowing no more than when they came in.

There are myriads of professing Christians in this state of soul. There is hardly a church or chapel, where scores of them are not to be found. Sunday after Sunday they allow the devil to catch away the good seed that is sown on the face of their hearts. Week after week they live on, without faith, or fear, or knowledge, or grace, feeling nothing, caring nothing, taking no more interest in religion, than if Christ had never died on the cross at all. And in this state they often die and are buried, and are lost forever in hell. This is a mournful picture, but only too true.

We are taught, in the second place, *that there are some hearers of the Gospel, whose hearts are like the stony ground in a field.*

These are they on whom preaching produces temporary impressions, but no deep, lasting, and abiding effect. They take pleasure in hearing sermons in which the truth is faithfully set forth. They can speak with apparent joy and enthusiasm about the sweetness of the Gospel, and the happiness which they experience in listening to it. They can be moved to tears by the appeals of preachers, and talk with apparent earnestness of their own inward conflicts, hopes, struggles, desires, and fears. But unhappily there is no stability about their religion. “They have no root in themselves, and so endure but for a time.” There is no real work of the Holy Ghost within their hearts. Their impressions are like Jonah’s gourd, which came up in a night and perished in a night. They fade as rapidly as they grow. No sooner does “affliction and persecution arise for the

Earthly things must remind us of heavenly. We must translate the book of nature into the book of grace.”—*Thomas Taylor on the Parable of the Sower.* 1634.

word's sake," than they fall away. Their goodness proves as "the morning cloud, and the early dew." (Hosea vi. 4.) Their religion has no more life in it than the cut flower. It has no root, and soon withers away.

There are many in every congregation which hears the Gospel, who are just in this state of soul. They are not careless and inattentive hearers, like many around them, and are therefore tempted to think well of their own condition. They feel a pleasure in the preaching to which they listen, and therefore flatter themselves they must have grace in their hearts. And yet they are thoroughly deceived. Old things have not yet passed away. There is no real work of conversion in their inward man. With all their feelings, affections, joys, hopes, and desires, they are actually on the high road to destruction.²

We are taught, in the third place, *that there are some hearers of the Gospel, whose hearts are like the thorny ground in a field.*

These are they who attend to the preaching of Christ's truth, and to a certain extent obey it. Their understanding assents to it. Their judgment approves of it. Their conscience is affected by it. Their affections are in favour of it. They acknowledge that it is all right, and good, and worthy of all reception. They even abstain from many things which the Gospel condemns, and adopt many habits which the Gospel requires. But here unhappily they stop short. Something appears to chain them fast, and they never get beyond a certain point in their religion. And the grand secret of their condition is the world. "The cares of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things," prevent the word having its full effect on their souls. With everything apparently that is promising and favourable in their spiritual state, they stand still. They never come up to the full standard of New Testament Christianity. They bring no fruit to perfection.

There are few faithful ministers of Christ who could not point to cases like these. Of all cases they are the most melancholy. To go so far and yet go no further,—to see so much and yet not see all,—to approve so much and yet not give Christ the heart, this is indeed most deplorable! And there is but one verdict that can be given about such people. Without a decided change they will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Christ will have all our hearts. "If any man will be a friend of the world, he is the enemy of God." (James iv. 4.)

² All who wish to understand the character of the "Stony-ground hearers," should study the treatise of Jonathan Edwards, on the Religious Affections. Few Christians, who have not looked into the subject, have any idea of the lengths to which a person may go in religious feelings, while he is at the same time utterly destitute of the grace of God.

We are taught in the last place, *that there are some hearers of the Gospel, whose hearts are like the good ground in a field.*

These are they who really receive Christ's truth into the bottom of their hearts, believe it implicitly, and obey it thoroughly. In these the fruits of that truth will be seen,—uniform, plain, and unmistakeable results in heart and life. Sin will be truly hated, mourned over, resisted, and renounced. Christ will be truly loved, trusted in, followed, loved, and obeyed. Holiness will show itself in all their conversation, in humility, spiritual-mindedness, patience, meekness, and charity. There will be something that can be seen. The true work of the Holy Ghost cannot be hid.

There will always be some persons in this state of soul, where the Gospel is faithfully preached. Their numbers may very likely be few, compared to the worldly around them. Their experience and degree of spiritual attainment may differ widely, some bringing forth thirty, some sixty, and some a hundred-fold. But the fruit of the seed falling into good ground will always be of the same kind. There will always be visible repentance, visible faith in Christ, and visible holiness of life. Without these things, there is no saving religion.

And now let us ask ourselves, What are we? Under which class of hearers ought we to be ranked? With what kind of hearts do we hear the word?—Never, never may we forget, that there are three ways of hearing without profit, and only one way of hearing aright! Never, never may we forget that there is only one infallible mark of being a right-hearted hearer! That mark is to bear fruit. To be without fruit, is to be in the way to hell.

MARK. IV. 21–25.

21 And he said unto them, Is a candle brought to be put under a bushel, or under a bed? and not to be set on a candlestick?

22 For there is nothing hid, which shall not be manifested; neither was anything kept secret, but that it should come abroad.

23 If any man have ears to hear, let him hear.

24 And he saith unto them, Take heed what ye hear: with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you: and unto you that hear shall more be given.

25 For he that hath, to him shall be given: and he that hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he hath.

THESE verses seem intended to enforce the parable of the sower on the attention of those who heard it. They are remarkable for the succession of short, pithy, proverbial sayings which they contain. Such sayings are eminently calculated to arrest an ignorant hearer. They often strike, and stick in the memory, when the main subject of the sermon is forgotten.³

We learn from these verses, *that we ought not only to receive knowledge, but to impart it to others.*

A candle is not lighted in order to be hidden and concealed, but to be set on a candlestick and used. Religious light is not given to a man for himself alone, but for the benefit of others. We are to try to spread and diffuse our knowledge. We are to display to others the precious treasure that we have found, and persuade them to seek it for themselves. We are to tell them of the good news that we have heard, and endeavour to make them believe it and value it themselves.

We shall all have to give account of our use of knowledge one day. The books of God in the day of judgment will show what we have done. If we have buried our talent in the earth,—if we have been content with a lazy, idle, do-nothing Christianity, and cared nothing what happened to others, so long as we went to heaven ourselves,—there will be a fearful exposure at last: “There is nothing hid, which shall not be manifested.”

It becomes all Christians to lay these things to heart. It is high time that the old tradition, that the clergy alone ought to teach and spread religious knowledge, should be exploded and cast aside for ever. To do good and diffuse light is a duty for which all members of Christ’s Church are responsible, whether ministers or laymen. Neighbours ought

³ The passage now under consideration is one among many proofs, that our Lord used the same words and the same ideas on many different occasions. The proverbial saying about the “candlestick under a bushel,” will be found in the Sermon on the Mount. So also the saying, “there is nothing hid that shall not be manifested,”—and the saying, “with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again,”—are both to be found in the Gospel of St. Matthew, but in both cases in an entirely different connexion from the passage in St. Mark now before us. (Matt. x. 26, and Matt. vii. 2.)

The subject is one that deserves attention. The needless difficulties that have been created by attempting to harmonize the Gospels, and to make out that our Lord never said the same thing more than once, are neither few nor small.

to tell neighbours, if they have found an unfailing remedy in time of plague. Christians ought to tell others that they have found medicine for their souls, if they see them ignorant, and dying for want of it. What saith the apostle Peter? “As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another.” (1 Peter iv. 10.) They will be happy days for the Church when that text is obeyed.

We learn, in the second place, from these verses, *the importance of hearing, and of considering well what we hear.*

This is a point to which our Lord evidently attaches great weight. We have seen it already brought out in the parable of the sower. We see it here enforced in two remarkable expressions. “If any man have an ear to hear, let him hear.” “Take heed what ye hear.”

Hearing the truth is one principal avenue through which grace is conveyed to the soul of man. “Faith cometh by hearing.” (Rom. x. 17.) One of the first steps towards conversion is to receive from the Spirit a hearing ear. Seldom are men brought to repentance and faith in Christ without “hearing.” The general rule is that of which St. Paul reminds the Ephesians, “ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth.” (Eph. i. 13.)

Let us bear this in mind when we hear preaching decried as a means of grace. There are never wanting men who seek to cast it down from the high place which the Bible gives it. There are many who proclaim loudly that it is of far more importance to the soul to hear liturgical forms read, and to receive the Lord’s Supper, than to hear God’s word expounded. Of all such notions let us beware. Let it be a settled principle with us that “hearing the word,” is one of the foremost means of grace that God has given to man. Let us give to every other means and ordinance its proper value and proportion. But never let us forget the words of St. Paul, “despise not prophesyings,” and his dying charge to Timothy, “Preach the word.”⁴ (1 Thess. v. 20. 2 Tim. iv. 2.)

We learn, in the last place, from these verses, *the importance of a diligent use of religious privileges.* What says our Lord? “Unto you that hear shall more be given. He that hath, to him shall be given: and he that hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he hath.”

⁴ “Public and continual preaching of God’s word is the ordinary means and instrument of the salvation of mankind. St. Paul calleth it the ministry of reconciliation of man unto God. By preaching of God’s word, the glory of God is enlarged, faith is nourished, and charity increased. By it the ignorant is instructed, the negligent exhorted and invited, the stubborn rebuked, the weak conscience comforted, and to all those that sin of malicious wickedness, the wrath of God is threatened. By preaching, due obedience to Christian princes and magistrates is planted in the hearts of subjects: for obedience proceedeth of conscience, conscience is grounded upon the word of God, the word of God worketh his effect by preaching. So as generally when preaching wanteth obedience faileth.”—*Archbishop Grindal’s Letter to Queen Elizabeth.*

This is a principle which we find continually brought forward in Scripture. All that believers have is undoubtedly of grace. Their repentance, faith, and holiness, are all the gift of God. But the degree to which a believer attains in grace, is ever set before us as closely connected with his own diligence in the use of means, and his own faithfulness in living fully up to the light and knowledge which he possesses. Indolence and laziness are always discouraged in God's word. Labour and pains in hearing, reading, and prayer, are always represented as bringing their own reward. "The soul of the diligent shall be made fat." (Prov. xiii. 4.) "An idle soul shall suffer hunger." (Prov. xix. 15.)

Attention to this great principle is the main secret of spiritual prosperity. The man who makes rapid progress in spiritual attainments,—who grows visibly in grace, and knowledge, and strength, and usefulness,—will always be found to be a diligent man. He leaves no stone unturned to promote his soul's well-doing. He is diligent over his Bible, diligent in his private devotions, diligent as a hearer of sermons, diligent in his attendance at the Lord's table. And he reaps according as he sows. Just as the muscles of the body are strengthened by regular exercise, so are the graces of the soul increased by diligence in using them.

Do we wish to grow in grace? Do we desire to have stronger faith, brighter hope, and clearer knowledge? Beyond doubt we do, if we are true Christians. Then let us live fully up to our light, and improve every opportunity. Let us never forget our Lord's words in this passage. "With what measure we mete" to our souls, "it shall be measured to us again." The more we do for our souls, the more shall we find God does for them.

MARK IV. 26–29.

26 And he said, So is the kingdom of God, as if a man should cast seed into the ground;

27 And should sleep, and rise night and day, and the seed should spring and grow up, he knoweth not how.

28 For the earth bringeth forth fruit of herself; first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear.

29 But when the fruit is brought forth, immediately he putteth in the sickle, because the harvest is come.

THE parable contained in these verses is short, and only recorded in St. Mark's Gospel. But it is one that ought to be deeply interesting to all who have reason to hope that they are true Christians. It sets before us the history of the work of grace in an individual soul. It summons us to an examination of our own experience in divine things.

There are some expressions in the parable which we must not press too far. Such are the "sleeping and rising" of the husband-man, and the "night and day." In this, as in many of our Lord's parables, we must carefully keep in view the main scope and object of the whole story, and not lay too much stress on lesser points. In the case before us the main thing taught is the close resemblance between some familiar operations in the culture of corn, and the work of grace in the heart. To this let us rigidly confine our attention.

We are taught firstly, that, as in the growth of corn, so in the work of grace, *there must be a sower.*

The earth, as we all know, never brings forth corn of itself. It is a mother of weeds, but not of wheat. The hand of man must plough it, and scatter the seed, or else there would never be a harvest.

The heart of man, in like manner, will never of itself turn to God, repent, believe, and obey. It is utterly barren of grace. It is entirely dead towards God, and unable to give itself spiritual life. The Son of man must break it up by His Spirit, and give it a new nature. He must scatter over it by the hand of His labouring ministers the good seed of the word.

Let us mark this truth well. Grace in the heart of man is an exotic. It is a new principle from without, sent down from heaven and implanted in his soul. Left to himself no man living would ever seek God. And yet in communicating grace, God ordinarily works by means. To despise the instrumentality of teachers and preachers, is to expect corn where no seed has been sown.

We are taught, secondly, that, as in the growth of corn, so in the work of grace, *there is much that is beyond man's comprehension and control.*

The wisest farmer on earth can never explain all that takes place in a grain of wheat, when he has sown it. He knows the broad fact that unless he puts it into the land, and covers it up, there will not be an ear of corn in time of harvest. But he cannot command the prosperity of each grain.

He cannot explain why some grains come up and others die. He cannot specify the hour or the minute when life shall begin to show itself. He cannot define what that life is. These are matters he must leave alone. He sows his seed, and leaves the growth to God. "God giveth the increase."⁵ (1 Cor. iii. 7.)

The workings of grace in the heart in like manner, are utterly mysterious and unsearchable. We cannot explain why the word produces effects on one person in a congregation, and not upon another. We cannot explain why, in some cases,—with every possible advantage, and in spite of every entreaty, people reject the word, and continue dead in trespasses and sins. We cannot explain why in other cases,—with every possible difficulty, and with no encouragement,—people are born again, and become decided Christians. We cannot define the manner in which the Spirit of God conveys life to a soul, and the exact process by which a believer receives a new nature. All these are hidden things to us. We see certain results, but we can go no further. "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit." (John iii. 10.)

Let us mark this truth also, for it is deeply instructive. It is humbling no doubt to ministers, and teachers of others. The highest abilities, the most powerful preaching, the most diligent working, cannot command success. God alone can give life. But it is a truth at the same time, which supplies an admirable antidote to over-carefulness and despondency. Our principal work is to sow the seed. That done, we may wait with faith and patience for the result. "We may sleep, and rise night and day," and leave our work with the Lord. He alone can, and, if He thinks fit, He will give success.

We are taught, thirdly, that, as in the growth of corn, so in the work of grace, *life manifests itself gradually*.

There is a true proverb which says, "Nature does nothing at a bound." The ripe ear of wheat does not appear at once, as soon as the seed bursts forth into life. The plant goes through many stages, before it arrives at perfection,—“first the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear.”

⁵ "A grain of corn, committed to the ground by the hand of man, will sprout and shoot; the shoot will disclose the stem, the stem the ear, and the ear the fruit: and were the most illiterate and unphilosophical person to be asked why all this should necessarily follow from the mere act of burying a seed in the earth, he might be disposed to laugh at the apparent simplicity of the question. Yet no human wisdom was ever able to return the answer to this question,—no human sagacity ever yet could penetrate into the true causes of this effect; and no human knowledge, upon such subjects, has ever gone further than the mere discovery, by a regular and constant experience, that such and such consequences will uniformly follow from such and such previous acts."—*Greswell on the Parables. Vol. 2; p. 132.*

But in all these stages one great thing is true about it,—even at its weakest, it is a living plant.

The work of grace, in like manner, goes on in the heart by degrees. The children of God are not born perfect in faith, or hope, or knowledge, or experience. Their beginning is generally a “day of small things.” They see in part their own sinfulness, and Christ’s fulness, and the beauty of holiness. But for all that, the weakest child in God’s family is a true child of God. With all his weakness and infirmity he is alive. The seed of grace has really come up in his heart, though at present it be only in the blade. He is “alive from the dead.” And the wise man says, “a living dog is better than a dead lion.” (Eccles. ix. 4.)

Let us mark this truth also, for it is full of consolation. Let us not despise grace, because it is weak, or think people are not converted, because they are not yet as strong in the faith as St. Paul. Let us remember that grace, like everything else, must have a beginning. The mightiest oak was once an acorn. The strongest man was once a babe. Better a thousand times have grace in the blade than no grace at all.

We are taught, lastly, that, as in the growth of corn, so in the work of grace, *there is no harvest till the seed is ripe.*

No farmer thinks of cutting his wheat when it is green. He waits till the sun, and rain, and heat, and cold, have done their appointed work, and the golden ears hang down. Then, and not till then, he puts in the sickle, and gathers the wheat into his barn.

God deals with His work of grace exactly in the same way. He never removes His people from this world till they are ripe and ready. He never takes them away till their work is done. They never die at the wrong time, however mysterious their deaths appear sometimes to man. Josiah, and James the brother of John were both cut off in the midst of usefulness. Our own King Edward the Sixth was not allowed to reach man’s estate. But we shall see in the resurrection morning that there was a needs-be. All was done well about their deaths, as well as about their births. The Great Husbandman never cuts His corn till it is ripe.

Let us leave the parable with this truth on our minds, and take comfort about the death of every believer. Let us rest satisfied, that there is no chance, no accident, no mistake about the decease of any of God’s children. They are all “God’s husbandry,” and God knows best when they are ready for the harvest.

MARK IV. 30–34.

30 And he said, Whereunto shall we liken the kingdom of God? or with what comparison shall we compare it?

31 *It is* like a grain of mustard seed, which, when it is sown in the earth, is less than all the seeds that be in the earth:

32 But when it is sown, it groweth up, and becometh greater than all herbs, and shooteth out great branches; so that the

fowls of the air may lodge under the shadow of it.

33 And with many such parables spake he the word unto them, as they were able to hear *it*.

34 But without a parable spake he not unto them: and when they were alone, he expounded all things to his disciples.

THE parable of the mustard seed is one of those parables which partake of the character both of history and prophecy. It seems intended to illustrate the history of Christ's visible church on earth, from the time of the first advent down to the judgment day. The seed cast into the earth, in the preceding parable, showed us the work of grace in a heart. The mustard seed shows us the progress of professing Christianity in the world.

We learn, in the first place, that, like the grain of mustard seed, *Christ's visible church was to be small and weak in its beginnings.*

A grain of mustard seed was a proverbial expression among the Jews for something very small and insignificant. Our Lord calls it "less than all the seeds that be in the earth." Twice in the Gospels we find our Lord using the figure as a word of comparison, when speaking of a weak faith. (Matt. xvii. 20. Luke xvii. 6.) The idea was doubtless familiar to a Jewish mind, however strange it may sound to us. Here, as in other places, the Son of God shows us the wisdom of using language familiar to the minds of those whom we address.

It would be difficult to find an emblem which more faithfully represents the history of the visible church of Christ, than this grain of mustard seed.

Weakness and apparent insignificance were undoubtedly the characteristics of its beginning. How did its Head and King come into the world? He came as a feeble infant, born in a manger at Bethlehem, without riches, or armies, or attendants, or power.—Who were the men that the Head of the Church gathered round Himself, and appointed His apostles? They were poor and unlearned persons,—fishermen, publicans, and men of like occupations, to all appearance the most unlikely people to shake the world.—What was the last public act of the earthly ministry of the great Head of the Church? He was crucified, like a malefactor, between two thieves, after having been forsaken by nearly all His disciples, betrayed by one, and denied by another.—What was the doctrine which the first builders of the Church went forth from the upper chamber in Jerusalem to preach to mankind? It was a doctrine which to the Jews was a stumbling-block, and to the Greeks foolishness. It was a proclamation

that the great Head of their new religion had been put to death on a cross, and that notwithstanding this, they offered life through His death to the world!—In all this the mind of man can perceive nothing but weakness and feebleness. Truly the emblem of the grain of mustard seed was verified and fulfilled to the very letter. To the eyes of man the beginning of the visible church was contemptible, insignificant, powerless, and small.

We learn, in the second place, that, like the mustard seed, *the visible church, once planted, was to grow and greatly increase.*

“The grain of mustard seed,” says our Lord, “when it is sown, groweth up and becometh greater than all herbs.” These words may sound startling to an English ear. We are not accustomed to such a growth in our cold northern climate. But to those who know eastern countries, there is nothing surprising in it. The testimony of well-informed and experienced travellers is distinct, that such an increase is both possible and probable.⁶

No figure could be chosen more strikingly applicable to the growth and increase of Christ’s visible church in the world. It began to grow from the day of Pentecost, and grew with a rapidity, which nothing can account for but the finger of God. It grew wonderfully when three thousand souls were converted at once, and five thousand more in a few days afterwards. It grew wonderfully, when at Antioch, and Ephesus, and Philippi, and Corinth, and Rome, congregations were gathered together, and Christianity firmly established. It grew wonderfully, when at last the despised religion of Christ overspread the greater part of Europe, and Asia Minor, and North Africa, and, in spite of fierce persecution and opposition, supplanted heathen idolatry, and became the professed creed of the whole Roman empire. Such growth must have been marvellous in the eyes of many. But it was only what our Lord foretold in the parable before us. “The kingdom of God is like a grain of mustard seed.”

The visible church of Christ has not yet done growing. Notwithstanding the melancholy apostasy of some of its branches, and the deplorable weakness of others, it is still extending and expanding over the world. New branches have continually been springing up in America, in India,

⁶ To show the size to which the mustard plant will grow in Eastern Countries, Lightfoot quotes the following passage from Rabbinical writers. “There was a stalk of mustard in Sichim, from which sprang out three boughs, one of which was broken off, and covered the tent of a potter, and produced three cabs of mustard.” Rabbi Simeon Ben Chalaphtha said, “a stalk of mustard seed was in my field, into which I was wont to climb, as men are wont to climb into a fig-tree.”

The enormous size to which the rhododendron, the heath, and the fern will grow, in some climates which suit them, better than ours, should be remembered by an English reader of this parable

in Australia, in Africa, in China, in the Islands of the South Seas, during the last fifty years. Evils undoubtedly there are many. False profession and corruption abound. But still, on the whole, heathenism is waning, wearing out, and melting away. In spite of all the predictions of Voltaire and Payne, in spite of foes without and treachery within, the visible church progresses,—the mustard plant still grows.

And the prophecy, we may rest assured, is not yet exhausted. A day shall yet come, when the great Head of the church shall take to His power, and reign, and put down every enemy under His feet. The earth shall yet be filled with the knowledge of God, as the waters cover the sea. (Isai. ii. 2.) Satan shall yet be bound. The heathen shall yet be our Lord's inheritance, and the utmost parts of the earth His possession. And then this parable shall receive its full accomplishment. The little seed shall become "a great tree," and fill the whole earth. (Dan. iii. 35.)

Let us leave the parable with a resolution never to despise any movement or instrumentality in the church of Christ, because at first it is weak and small. Let us remember the manger of Bethlehem, and learn wisdom. The name of Him who lay there, a helpless infant, is now known all over the globe. The little seed which was planted in the day when Jesus was born, has become a great tree, and we ourselves are rejoicing under its shadow. Let it be a settled principle in our religion, never to "despise the day of small things." (Zech. iv. 10.) One child may be the beginning of a flourishing school,—one conversion the beginning of a mighty church,—one word the beginning of some blessed christian enterprise,—one seed the beginning of a rich harvest of saved souls.⁷

⁷ It is fair to say that the view which I have adopted of the meaning of this parable, is not the view which is held by some interpreters.

Some think that the parable is intended to show the progress of the work of grace in the heart of an individual believer. I am not prepared to say that this may not have been in our Lord's mind, in speaking the parable. I think it quite possible that the parable admits of a double interpretation; for the experience of a believer and the experience of the whole church, are much the same. My principal objection to this view is, that it does not appear to suit the language of the parable so well as that which I have maintained.

Some few interpreters think that the mustard seed signifies the principle of evil and corruption, and that the main object of the parable is to show how insidiously apostasy would begin in the church, and how completely it would at last overgrow and fill the whole body. I own that I cannot for a moment see the soundness of this interpretation. To say nothing of other reasons, there seems an excessive harshness in this sense, when we consider the opening words of the parable, "Wherewith shall we liken the kingdom of God?" One would rather expect the question to have been "wherewith shall we liken the kingdom of the devil?" if the whole parable is occupied with describing the progress of evil.

I confess that I think the meaning of "the fowls of the air," is a point which admits of some question. Many think that it signifies the number of converts to Christianity, who as the church increased, joined themselves to it, and came "as doves to the windows." (Isaiah lx. 8.) Some think that it signifies the number of worldly and false pro-

fessors who joined the church from mere carnal motives, when it began to be great and prosperous, as in the days of Constantine. When we remember that the “fowls of the air,” in the parable of the sower, (Mark. iv. 4-15.) are declared by our Lord Himself to mean “Satan,” we must admit that there is considerable force in this interpretation.

MARK IV. 35-41.

35 And the same day, when the even was come, he saith unto them, Let us pass over unto the other side.	him, and say unto him, Master, carest thou not that we perish?
36 And when they had sent away the multitude, they took him even as he was in the ship. And there were also with him other little ships.	39 And he arose, and rebuked the wind, and said unto the sea, Peace, be still. And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm.
37 And there arose a great storm of wind, and the waves beat into the ship, so that it was now full.	40 And he said unto them. Why are ye so fearful? how is it that ye have no faith?
38 And he was in the hinder part of the ship, asleep on a pillow: and they awake	41 And they feared exceedingly, and said one to another, What manner of man is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?

THESE verses describe a storm on the sea of Galilee, when our Lord and His disciples were crossing it, and a miracle performed by our Lord in calming the storm in a moment. Few miracles recorded in the Gospel were so likely to strike the minds of the disciples as this. Four of them at least were fishermen. Peter, Andrew, James, and John, had probably known the sea of Galilee, and its storms, from their youth. Few events in our Lord's journeyings to and fro upon earth, contain more rich instruction than the one related in this passage.

Let us learn, in the first place, *that Christ's service does not exempt His servants from storms.* Here were the twelve disciples in the path of duty. They were obediently following Jesus wherever He went. They were daily attending on His ministry, and hearkening to His word. They were daily testifying to the world, that, whatever Scribes and Pharisees might think, they believed on Jesus, loved Jesus, and were not ashamed to give up all for His sake. Yet here we see these men in trouble, tossed up and down by a tempest, and in danger of being drowned.

Let us mark well this lesson. If we are true Christians, we must not expect everything smooth in our journey to heaven. We must count it no strange thing, if we have to endure sicknesses, losses, bereavements, and disappointments, just like other men. Free pardon and full forgiveness, grace by the way and glory at the end,—all this our Saviour has promised to give. But He has never promised that we shall have no afflictions. He loves us too well to promise that. By affliction He teaches us many precious lessons, which without it we should never learn. By affliction He shows us our emptiness and weakness, draws us to the throne of grace, purifies our affections, weans us from the world, makes us long for heaven. In the resurrection morning we shall all say, "it is good for me that I was afflicted." We shall thank God for every storm.

Let us learn, in the second place, *that our Lord Jesus Christ was really and truly man.* We are told in these verses, that when the storm began, and the waves beat over the ship, he was in the hinder part "asleep." He

had a body exactly like our own,—a body that could hunger, and thirst, and feel pain, and be weary, and need rest. No wonder that His body needed repose at this time. He had been diligent in His Father's business all the day. He had been preaching to a great multitude in the open air. No wonder that "when the even was come," and His work finished, he fell "asleep."

Let us mark this lesson also attentively. The Saviour in whom we are bid to trust, is as really man as He is God. He knows the trials of a man, for He has experienced them. He knows the bodily infirmities of a man, for He has felt them. He can well understand what we mean, when we cry to Him for help in this world of need. He is just the very Saviour that men and women, with weary frames and aching heads, in a weary world, require for their comfort every morning and night. "We have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities." (Heb. iv. 15.)

Let us learn, in the third place, *that our Lord Jesus Christ, as God, has almighty power.* We see Him in these verses doing that which is proverbially impossible. He speaks to the winds, and they obey Him. He speaks to the waves, and they submit to His command. He turns the raging storm into a calm with a few words,—“Peace, be still.” Those words were the words of Him who first created all things. The elements knew the voice of their Master, and, like obedient servants, were quiet at once.

Let us mark this lesson also, and lay it up in our minds. With the Lord Jesus Christ nothing is impossible. No stormy passions are so strong but He can tame them. No temper is so rough and violent but He can change it. No conscience is so disquieted, but He can speak peace to it, and make it calm. No man ever need despair, if He will only bow down his pride, and come as a humbled sinner to Christ. Christ can do miracles upon his heart.—No man ever need despair of reaching his journey's end, if he has once committed his soul to Christ's keeping. Christ will carry him through every danger. Christ will make him conqueror over every foe.—What though our relations oppose us? What though our neighbours laugh us to scorn? What though our place be hard? What though our temptations be great? It is all nothing, if Christ is on our side, and we are in the ship with Him. Greater is He that is for us, than all they that are against us.

Finally, we learn from this passage, *that our Lord Jesus Christ is exceedingly patient and pitiful in dealing with His own people.* We see the disciples on this occasion showing great want of faith, and giving way to most unseemly fears. They forgot their Master's miracles and care for them in days gone by. They thought of nothing but their present peril. They awoke our Lord hastily, and cried, "carest thou not that we per-

ish?” We see our Lord dealing most gently and tenderly with them. He gives them no sharp reproof. He makes no threat of casting them off because of their unbelief. He simply asks the touching question, “Why are ye so fearful? How is it that ye have no faith?”

Let us mark well this lesson. The Lord Jesus is very pitiful and of tender mercy. “As a father pitieth his children, even so the Lord pitieth them that fear Him.” (Psalm ciii. 13.) He does not deal with believers according to their sins, nor reward them according to their iniquities. He sees their weakness. He is aware of their short-comings. He knows all the defects of their faith, and hope, and love, and courage. And yet He will not cast them off. He bears with them continually. He loves them even to the end. He raises them when they fall. He restores them when they err. His patience, like His love, is a patience that passeth knowledge. When He sees a heart right, it is His glory to pass over many a short-coming.

Let us leave these verses with the comfortable recollection that Jesus is not changed. His heart is still the same that it was when He crossed the sea of Galilee and stilled the storm. High in heaven at the right hand of God, Jesus is still sympathizing,—still almighty, still pitiful and patient towards His people.—Let us be more charitable and patient towards our brethren in the faith. They may err in many things, but if Jesus has received them and can bear with them, surely we may bear with them too.—Let us be more hopeful about ourselves. We may be very weak, and frail, and unstable; but if we can truly say that we do come to Christ and believe on Him, we may take comfort. The question for conscience to answer is not, “Are we like the angels? are we perfect as we shall be in heaven?” The question is, “Are we real and true in our approaches to Christ? Do we truly repent and believe?”⁸

⁸ The sea of Galilee, or Tiberias, on which the circumstances recorded in this passage took place, is an inland lake, through which the river Jordan flows, about fifteen miles long and six broad. It lies in a deep valley, much depressed below the level of the sea,—its surface being 652 feet below that of the Mediterranean,—and is surrounded on most sides by steep hills. Owing to these last circumstances, sudden squalls or storms are reported by all travellers to be very common on the lake.

The sea of Galilee and the country surrounding it, were favoured with more of our blessed Lord’s presence, during His earthly ministry, than any other part of Palestine. Capernaum, Tiberias, Bethsaida, and the country of the Gergesenes were all on its shores, or in the immediate neighbourhood of this lake. It was on the sea of Galilee that our Lord walked. It was on its shore that He appeared to His disciples after His resurrection. Sitting in a boat on its waters and in a house hard by, He delivered the seven parables recorded in the 13th chapter of St. Matthew. On its banks, He called Peter, and Andrew, James and John. From it, He commanded His disciples to draw the miraculous draught of fishes. Within sight of it, He twice fed the multitude with a few loaves and fishes. On its shore, He healed the man possessed with devils; and into it the two thousand swine plunged headlong after that miracle had been wrought.