

Expository Tracts, No. 26.

THE SEED AND ITS GROWTH.

BEING

THOUGHTS ON MARK IV. 26—29.

BY THE

RIGHT REV. BISHOP RYLE, D.D.

DRUMMOND'S TRACT DEPOT, STIRLING.

Price 2s. per 100.

THE SEED AND ITS GROWTH.

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 which 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 husbandman, 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." (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 whether it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit." (John iii. 8.)

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 being 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.” 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 ex-

perience. 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 every thing 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.