**WESTMINSTER BIBLE SCHOOL; THE PARABLES AND METAPHORS OF OUR LORD - THE TEACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**29. THE GROWTH OF THE SEED**

*"He said, "God's Kingdom is as if a man should cast seed on the earth, and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should spring up and grow, though he doesn't know how. For the earth bears fruit: first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the fruit is ripe, immediately he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."*

*Mark 4:26-29*

IT IS certainly an arresting fact that this parable is only recorded by Mark, and it is peculiar therefore to His Gospel. He records others of the parables, and some of the parabolic illustrations found in the Gospel of Matthew.

A certain amount of wonder and speculation is permissible, providing it is not carried too far. Why has only Mark given this parable? I do not know, but one does wonder, especially because of its remarkable value, a value that no other parable had which Jesus uttered concerning the Kingdom. It assumes the teaching of the other parables, and so is arresting that Mark has recorded it. Perhaps it specially impressed Mark because of his own character. His was an interesting personality. Paul and Barnabas had a difference of opinion concerning him, so definite a quarrel that they parted company. Paul may have been right that Mark was vacillating, that when he went back at Pamphylia, there was some element of weakness in his character. To give a personal opinion, if Paul were right, my sympathy is with Barnabas. He kept Mark with him, and gave him another chance. That is a better attitude. Perhaps this parable therefore gripped Mark, and came back to him in after years, that marvellous parable revealing the necessity for patience, first the blade and then the ear, and then the full corn in the ear.

We do not know why only Mark has recorded this parable; and moreover, there is nothing to show definitely when it was uttered. Undoubtedly it was given on that first day of parabolic discourse. The thirtieth verse begins, "And He said, How shall we liken the Kingdom of God? or in what parable shall we set it forth? It is like a grain of mustard seed." There Mark records one of the parables Jesus gave on that great day of parabolic utterance, recorded fully by Matthew in this thirteenth chapter. Mark does say, "With many such parables spake Jesus the word unto them, as they were able to hear it; and without a parable spake He not unto them; but privately to His own disciples He expounded all things." So it is possible that this little parable was spoken on that self-same day. It is even possible that it was spoken on the first day of parabolic discourse between others that are closely related to it, possibly after the parable of the sower that went forth to sow, and before the parable of the wheat and the darnel, showing the two sowings going forward; and so leading on to that of the mustard seed, which Mark also records. More than that cannot possibly be said, except that we pause to notice the similarity of the basic ideas in this group of parables. In every one of them is the seed containing potentialities, but needing to be sown. In every one we have growth, development, consequent upon sowing, and in every one there is harvest, the result of the development, consequent upon the sowing.

The central matter in this little parable is that of growth. Sowing is recognized. Harvest is also recognized, but the teaching concerns the process between the sowing and the harvest. If we have all those parables in mind, and remember how our Lord had likened the Kingdom under these changing and yet similar figures of speech, we are prepared to approach this. Following our method, let us look at the figure which our Lord here employed.

It is a perfectly natural one, and therefore absolutely necessary, A man sows seed. Notice how our Lord says this. "So is the Kingdom of God as if " , "So ... as if a man should cast seed upon the earth." Then, when this man has sown the seed, he goes on with his ordinary life. There is nothing reprehensible in this. It is "as if a man should cast seed upon the earth and should sleep and rise "- two periods of time, "night and day." Night for sleep; day for rising, which means activity. What is the man doing in the picture? He has sown his seed, and then he goes on with his ordinary life. Quite properly he goes to sleep at night, and rises in the morning. He carries on.

Meanwhile, what he has done in sowing the seed, is being carried forward without his help. "And the seed should spring up and grow, he knoweth not how." Mark that carefully, for we shall return to it in another connection. What does happen? "The earth beareth of herself." The man is doing nothing. He cannot do anything. He has done something. He has sown the seed, but there is no more he can do yet. He goes to sleep, and goes on with his ordinary life; but all the while in that period, when he can do no more, something is going on. The seed is springing and growing; he does not know how, and "it beareth fruit." "The earth bringeth forth of herself."

What is he to do? Watch. "First the blade." We have all seen this in the country; and that goes on, until we see the ear, and that goes on until we see "the full corn," ripeness and maturity. All this time, the man who has sown the seed is doing nothing with regard to what he has sown. He has done his duty. He has sown the seed. He goes to sleep, and he rises, in night and day, but there is no cessation in the activity resulting from what he has done, though he is not now acting. The result of what he has done is that the seed is springing, growing, developing, and it is coming quietly, first the blade, then the ear, and then the full corn in the ear. There are certain laws and forces inherent in the seed and in the soil. In the seed is a principle of life. That principle is in every seed. There are forces of life in the soil, and these forces of life in the soil, in co-operation with the forces of life in the seed, produce a result, and produce it quietly; and presently, "first the blade, then the ear," and then the full growth.

Take the whole, and see a wonderful co-operation between man and Nature. Nature cannot sow, and it cannot reap. Man cannot give the increase. The figure is everything in this parable. It carries its own lesson. The marvellous forcefulness of this grips us. In the first great parable, the sower went forth to sow. Whereas the one Sower was the Lord Himself, He is not the Sower here, because the figure says that the man does not know how the growth is going on. He cannot help it, and cannot do anything about it. That is not true of the Lord. It is true of us, and of everyone called into co-operation with Him in sowing seed. We know what the seed is. We have had the figure in other parables. The seed is the Word.

We have a wonderful figure here. We need not go to the East for this. We can look at it in our own land anywhere. A man goes forth to sow, and when he has done his sowing there is no more he can do. He must wait, but there is no cessation of activity. There is an activity resulting from his sowing. The seed he sows has fallen upon the soil, and the earth brings forth fruit of itself, Then presently,

"He clothes the smiling fields with corn,"

How do they come? Not golden harvest yet; but "first the blade," and what a wonderful picture it is, a field, when that first blade is appearing, the shimmer of its emerald green from end to end. Watch it, until presently the ear is at the head of every stalk. Wait a little while longer, and it is ripe. Then the man comes back, and does something. Then he puts in his sickle. Now the earth cannot produce a harvest unless the seed is sown; and the man cannot produce a harvest unless he sows the seed; but having sown the seed he has to wait, and wait patiently for all those processes of Nature which result presently in germination, growth, development, and finally harvest.

What a wonderful parable it is, in the midst of the rest. We cannot understand it in any true way unless we keep it in relation to the others, especially the first, the one Sower going forth to sow. In Matthew's account of the Kingdom parables, the seed sown was the Word of God incarnate in human lives. When Luke gave the account of that parable, as I believe on another occasion, he distinctly said the seed is the Word of God. But whether the Word in essence, or the Word incarnate in human beings, men and women, sons and daughters of the Kingdom, the great principle is the Word of God. Do not forget, "So is the Kingdom." Here we see those who are His, carrying out this self-same work of scattering the seed. "So is the Kingdom." That is how it begins, how it always begins.

The application is evidently to us in this sense, because He is not ignorant as to the *how*. This man does not understand, but the great revelation of this parable is our Lord's teaching about the Kingdom, and about Himself as the Sower, and about the Word of God, the life principle out of which all the true activities and results must grow.

This parable therefore teaches first of all the necessity for sowing. That has been said in other ways in looking at the figure. There must be this sowing of the seed. The earth will produce no harvest of itself. What harvest? The Kingdom of God, His rule, His reign, His triumph over all human affairs. For the bringing in of that harvest the seed must be sown. That is the first teaching. The man casts seed upon the earth. The earth produces no harvest from itself.

Then to me at least this is always the true impact of this parable, the necessity for patience, because of this inability in the actual realm of life. We can take the life principle of the Word of God and scatter it. That is our duty, whether we do it by preaching or teaching or living, which is potent also. We can do that, sow the seed, and that is all. Paul may plant, Apollos water, but it is God Who gives the increase. We need to be reminded of this. That does not say that man has nothing to do. It only reveals the point at which man's doing must cease, and in which he must exercise patience. Man can help or hinder. Man helps by ploughing up the fallow ground by all those processes that prepare for the scattering of the seed. In a thousand ways we can help. All that is preparatory to the one thing, the scattering of the seed. We can hinder. Man can even in his folly trample upon the blade as it appears, and crush it out ere it have time to develop. All that is admitted. Interference may be destructive, but man cannot produce a harvest. Man cannot produce a harvest even by the sowing of the Word of God. In a sense his very sowing is preparing for harvest, but all this is an unveiling of the necessity for standing still, and being patient. The co-operation of life forces outside himself produces harvest.

Let us be very practical about that. Are we not in danger of wanting to see results too soon, and too quickly from our sowing? Have we learned the secret of the husbandman who hath patience as he waits "for the precious fruit of the earth," that great declaration of one of the epistles concerning God? We are all in danger of doing what some of us did when we were children, when we were given a little plot of garden. We dug it and got the soil ready; we planted our seeds, and in a week or two we were digging them up to see how they were getting on! We are very much given to digging up what we have planted, instead of resting content to scatter the seed, and leave it to the forces of God to bring in the harvest.

And yet there is a necessity for reaping. When the full harvest is there, when the manifestation is there that the sowing of the seed has produced this process of development, the blade and ear and full corn, then the harvest. In that sense we may take this parable and apply it as to the Sower, as to the Lord Himself, although primarily it was intended for those working for Him. He has patience, and waits for the precious fruit of the earth, and how patient He is. But the harvest will come. Then His sickle will be put in.

I am more concerned with the application of the parable to ourselves, and the first of all to our work. We do want harvest. Jesus said, "The fields are white already to harvest." What fields? Fields that others have sown before us. We may never reap from our sowing here, it may be, or perchance we may. But the fields are white with the sowing of those who have gone before, in a myriad ways; and whereas we may always be sowing, we may always be putting in the sickle to reap. But that which we reap has not come suddenly. That also had its sowing, and it is the development through blade and ear until that harvest came. As Jesus looked out He saw harvest everywhere, "The harvest is plenteous, but the labourers are few." "Put in the sickle," He said on two memorable occasions; and so is it to-day, and so it is everywhere.

What is our relation to this whole process within the work of the Kingdom of God? First of all activity, sowing the seed. Let us be very careful we are sowing the right seed, and the only seed that will bring forth the fruit of the Kingdom of God in this world, the seed of the Word of God. I should not like to say that conviction about that has gone out of date; but it has weakened within the processes of the last generation or more. Whatever opinion I may have of it does not matter finally. There is no doubt, however, that He is calling us to a tremendous work, the supreme sufficiency of the Word of God. Let us see to it that we are sowing the right seed in life and in teaching.

What next? A sense of our helplessness in the matter of the germination of the seed. No, we cannot do that. We scatter it, and then we stand aside. To quote it again. Paul may plant. Paul must plant, and Apollos may attend to irrigation, as he waters. I go further, and say he must do it. But there is a process that Paul cannot help in, and that Apollos cannot serve. It is God's work; and it is great to learn to be patient with God.

Then in conclusion we may apply it to individual life. Do not be impatient about your own life. I know it is almost a dangerous thing to say because some people are careless. On the other hand, I meet so many people who are impatient with themselves when God is patient with them. Do not forget, first the blade, and if that is there, life is there; and if life is there, there is the promise of growth and development. Do not be impatient. Do not dig the blade up to see what is happening. Leave it alone. Then the ear, and that proves the process is happening, and we wait a little longer, and there is the full corn in the ear. No, not on a sudden, in a moment is this great work of the Kingdom of God completed in any human soul. Yes, suddenly, in a moment it begins, when the seed falls upon the soil. Let us recognise then that which makes it grow and develop is the action of God. Let us see to it we do not hinder that, but yield ourselves to the life forces that are ours by faith in the Word of the living God. Let us wait for the full ear, and the richness of the harvest.