

Sowing and Reaping

F. B. Hole.

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The Epistle to the Galatians was written in defence of the truth of the Gospel. The particular errors it meets were those introduced by men of a legal type, coming from Jerusalem, whose aim was to subject all Christians to the law of Moses, and thus to make Christianity but a new and vigorous offshoot and development of Judaism.

In meeting these errors the Apostle Paul draws very striking contrasts between "the Jew's religion" and "the truth of the Gospel"; and we might sum up those contrasts, we think, under three heads, viz.:-

Law and grace,

Works and faith,

Flesh and Spirit;

the three former are linked together as inseparably connected with "the Jew's religion" in which Paul "profited" above many of his contemporaries (Gal. 1: 14); the three latter combine in connection with Christianity.

The Jewish nation had its birth in Abraham, the Jewish kingdom in David, but the Jews' religion started when the law was given at Sinai. In the law of Moses God formulated His righteous demands upon men. He joined with these demands much in the way of ceremonial observance, which had the effect, if observed by Israel, of making them a peculiar people and hindering their free intercourse with the nations. These barriers were purposely erected to act as a kind of insulation so that the test which the law proposed might be carried out under the most favourable circumstances. He also connected with His demands the system of sacrifice which foreshadowed the way in which all the questions which the law raised and left unanswered, would in due time be settled to His glory.

The requirement of the law may be summed up in one word — works. Its demands, whether positive or in the form of prohibitions, were to be met by simple obedience. It was "This *do*, and thou shalt live." It called not for discussion of its terms, nor for promises of future improvement, but for instant obedience in works to its behests.

Yet it addressed itself to man in his fallen condition and therefore to the flesh — the Scripture term for that degraded moral condition, or nature, which lies inherent in man's material and physical flesh as the result of the fall. Here lay the secret of the whole breakdown as far as man was concerned. In the law, life was proposed to man as the result of obedience. Yet that "which was ordained to life" turned out "to be unto death" (Rom. 7: 10). The law could not produce compliance with its demands "in that it was weak through the flesh" (Rom. 8: 3). This Scripture statement casts no discredit upon the law, which was "holy, just, and good" (Rom. 7: 12); the fact is that in the flesh dwells "no good thing" (Rom. 7: 18), and hence it is hopeless material for the law to operate upon. If a sculptor were presented with first-class tools and an excellent block of marble on which to work, and the result were a hopeless botch, the critics would rightly attribute blame to the sculptor. If, on the other hand, he were presented with a heap of dry sand on which to exercise his skill, they would exonerate him from all blame. In that case all the failure is in the material and not the sculptor. Thus was it with the law and the flesh.

Hence, though there was breakdown, there was no breakdown in the law. God presented it as a way of life to man, in order to demonstrate to man that it was a way he could not take. God intended it to convict man, stop his mouth, and shut him up to the grace that was coming. This it most effectually did.

"The truth of the Gospel" is that grace has come in Christ and through His redemptive work. It is presented to faith, for the Gospel does not call upon man to do anything, but rather to look in faith upon what Christ has done, and consequent upon faith is the gift of the Spirit; and the Spirit being received He is to be the active energizer of the believer's new life, and not the flesh.

The unbeliever, then, acts according to the flesh, for he has no other principle of life within him. The believer still has the flesh within him, for it is the nature inherent in his mortal body, in which he lives after conversion as truly as he did before conversion; yet he possesses the Spirit of God as the energy of that new life which is his in Christ. Here is an altogether *different* energy of life as to *character*, and altogether *superior* as to *power*. If the believer walks in the Spirit he does "not fulfil the lust of the flesh" (Gal. 5: 16). A new Power is present which then supersedes the old and renders it impotent, "that ye should not do those things which ye desire" (Gal. 5: 17, N.Tr.).

Scripture, then, clearly recognizes the presence in the believer of both the Spirit and the flesh. It also recognizes the individuality and personality of the believer, the "ego" as it is sometimes termed. The flesh is not myself, for it is "my flesh." Needless to say, the Spirit is not myself. Yet there is myself — I - the responsible individual; and as far as practical Christianity is concerned, everything turns on the relation which I, myself, hold in regard to the flesh and the Spirit.

This practical side of things is summed up for us in Galatians 6: 7 and 8, under the figure of "sowing" and "reaping." Our thoughts, our words, and our actions are viewed as so many acts of seed sowing. All depends on whether we sow *to* the flesh or *to* the Spirit, i.e., whether the tendency and intent and end of our sowing is to the gratification of the cravings of the flesh or of the desires of the Spirit. This it is which determines the character of our sowing, and consequently the character of the reaping.

It is, of course, true that we reap as we sow as to *quantity*. 2 Corinthians 9: 6 emphasises this side of the question. "He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly, and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully." Our Scripture is enforcing the truth that as surely as God is God, we reap as we sow as to *character* or *kind*. We cannot sow one kind and reap another kind. There is no such thing as "transmutation of species" in the material creation, though evolutionary philosophers have eagerly sought it. Men cannot sow thistles and reap wheat, or cockle and have a harvest of barley. Neither is there transmutation of species in the spiritual realm. If we sow to the gratification of the flesh we reap corruption, always corruption, and nothing but corruption. If we sow to the Spirit we reap everlasting life. Let us not deceive ourselves on this point, for we are apt to do so, as the apostle's warning implies.

Flesh and corruption are thus inseparably connected as cause and effect. This has been true as to man's physical flesh ever since the fall. His flesh then became mortal flesh with corruption as its inevitable end. It became equally true of his moral condition and nature which is "the flesh" in the passage we are considering. Its workings always issue in moral and spiritual corruption. The "old man" is "corrupt, according to the deceitful lusts" (Eph. 4: 22), and so deceitful are its lusts that what appears to be the most intellectual and refined philosophic speculation may really be the wanderings of human minds that are controlled by the *lusts*, that is, the *desires*, of the flesh. Such persons just end by thinking what they *want* to think; and all the corruption which fills the world to-day originates in *thought*: words

and actions follow after.

The world then is full of corruption, but how solemn for us believers to think that whenever we pander to the flesh and its desires we lay up for ourselves a harvest of corruption, and that the amount of our sowing in that direction will determine the quantity of the harvest. We may rejoice that these principles are equally true if we turn to the other side, if we sow to the Spirit.

To some of our readers it may appear strange that the term "everlasting life" should be given as the antithesis of "corruption"; and the very idea of everlasting life being "reaped" by anyone as the fruit of a previous sowing may appear to be difficult of explanation; and more difficult and remarkable still that all this should be addressed to believers. Such may ask if this passage does not contradict those statements as to eternal life being the portion of the believer which are found in the Gospel of John.

There is, however, no contradiction; and there is no real difficulty if we grasp but something of the fulness of meaning which lies in the term "everlasting life." If we speak but of natural "life" as we have it in this world, we know it to be a term of great fulness as to its meaning.

For instance: Here on a bed lies a prostrate form. The patient is critically ill, unconscious, and breathing but feebly. A doctor stands by the bedside, and in answer to an anxious enquiry he pronounces that life is still there, and that while there is life there is hope. We all know what he means. Life in the primary sense, the vital spark, so to speak, is still there and may yet be fanned into a flame. Yet that primary meaning by no means gives a full and proper idea of what human life is. No artist who painted a picture of such a scene, however beautiful and full of pathos it might be, would dream of hanging it in the Academy under the title "Life." No! He would select some subject expressive of human life in its full energy of expression, of the way in which that life may be developed in favourable and happy surroundings. He would paint, perhaps, a picture of healthful and happy children racing along the golden sands in summer sunshine, for we frequently and rightly use the word life in the secondary sense which implies all those relationships and surroundings in which we are set and in which human life develops. The Scriptures themselves speak of human life in this secondary sense when they say, "What man is he that desireth life, and loveth many days, that he may see good?" (Ps. 34: 12).

Life in its primary meaning has been spoken of as "life *potential*," i.e., in its potential form, containing within itself marvellous possibilities, as yet undeveloped; in its secondary meaning as "life *phenomenal*," i.e., as expressed in its phenomena; or even as life in its *pregnant* form, i.e., full of significance as to all the relationships and enjoyments which are its proper portion.

In just the same way "everlasting life" in Scripture means far more than eternal existence. It is, indeed, ours as a new life in the *potential* sense, but it is equally ours in the *phenomenal* and *pregnant* sense, as this Scripture which we are considering shows. In this secondary sense, while ours, it is to be entered upon experimentally and enjoyed, and the more we "sow to the Spirit" the larger our experimental entrance into the relationships and occupations and joys which are essential to it, and which are of such purity and holiness as to be the exact antithesis to the corruption which is the outcome of "sowing to the flesh." Other Scriptures which show that this fulness of meaning is contained in the term "everlasting life" may be turned to. Conspicuous among them are 1 Timothy 6: 12, and John 17: 3.

This digression has been necessary that we should understand and fairly grasp the nature of the alternative presented to us. To the three sets of contrasts pointed out at the beginning of our paper we may now add a fourth,

viz.:-

Corruption and *everlasting life*.

The character of the believer's life will have its answer in the coming age in the shape of loss or reward, but this Scripture is enforcing the present effects. It is a tremendously solemn consideration that every act of our lives has its tendency, sows its seed, in one or other of these two directions. A hundred times a day we stand either in thought or word or act at the parting of the ways and yield either to the desires of the flesh or of the Spirit. Many Christians are puzzled by the happenings that crowd into their lives. All seems a strange jumble of events and experiences, like an allotment patch which is a tangle of useful vegetables and noxious weeds. Is there, however, any real cause for wonder?

Alas, no! We have made the tangle ourselves. We have sowed to the flesh, often with lavish hand. Had our hearts been under the constraining influence of the love of Christ we should steadily have said, "No" to the flesh, and "Yes" to the Spirit of God, and the result would have been far different.

This sowing, be it noted, comes down to what we might consider very ordinary matters. The immediate context of the passage (verses 6 and 9, 10) shows that what gave rise to the enunciation of these weighty principles were practical matters connected with the temporal support of teachers of the Word, and acting in generosity to all men, especially fellow-believers.

In conclusion, let us take it to heart that the option in this matter, the responsibility of deciding one way or the other, rests with us. It is not something which we can settle for ever by one decision. The flesh is in us and, except we habitually live as those who have been crucified with Christ, it bids for recognition and gratification. The Spirit of God indwells us as "the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus." But it is WE who sow, and sow in one direction or the other. Our spiritual prosperity hangs upon our sowing. In which direction is it to be?

To decide aright there must be earnest and prayerful dependence upon God Himself. Let us pray.