

THE FULLER FRUITAGE

"Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit." John 12:24.

Everyone knows that in Christianity there is faith. Christians are believers.

Everyone knows that in Christianity there is feeling. Christians have at least some sentiment and emotions that mark them off from others.

But too few people today realize that in Christianity there is fruit. Christians, if they be the kind they should be, are producers. Significant things happen to them, and equally significant things happen through them.

In Luke 13:7, where the Master tells of His disappointment over the spiritual barrenness of the religious leaders of His day, He says: "I come seeking fruit!" You say you have faith in God, then show it by your works. You say you love God, then show it by loving your neighbor. You say you have given your life to the Lord, then lay it down in dedicated willingness to lose it, for in no other way will you keep it eternally.

The setting of our text is picturesque and deeply suggestive. Christ, for the second time, had just cleansed the court where the Gentile proselytes worshipped in the temple, the one which stood between the exclusive court of the Jews and the outside world. Some Greeks came where the Lord Jesus was talking, and singling out one of His disciples, Philip by name, expressed their desire to have an interview with Christ. They expressed their deep longing in the words, "Sir, we would see Jesus."

That they should go to Philip was perfectly natural, because he had the Greek name and they would therefore be attracted to him. Philip, having heard their request, called into counsel Andrew, another man with a Greek name, and the two consulted about this desire of those visiting Greeks. It is not surprising that Philip took counsel with Andrew, for he was noted for his ability at introducing people to Christ. Why, the great preacher at Pentecost was introduced to Christ by Andrew, and, in the day when the rewards are given, Andrew will certainly receive one for his marvelous achievement in bringing Simon Peter to Christ.

Who those Greeks were we do not know. They appeared out of the mists of obscurity, stood for a few minutes in the light of the gospel stage, and then disappeared into the mists again. But all the tides of time cannot drown the memory of them, for they are immortalized by the words, "We would see Jesus." They wanted to have a personal interview with Christ, and they honored Philip by asking him to introduce them to the Saviour. Are you, like Philip, known as a person who can introduce people to Christ?

Philip and Andrew told Christ of the desire of these Greeks to have an interview with Him. He did not tell the disciples to bring them to Him, but He replied, "The hour is come, that the Son of man should be glorified. Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit."

Christ challenged them to look at a grain of wheat. He told them that unless it died, no new and greater life would ever come from it. That, said He, applies to Me, as you shall see after I am crucified and risen again. It also applies to you, My disciples, as you shall see when you are willing to die utterly to yourselves in order that God by His Spirit may live uncontestedly in you. Otherwise, like a lonely grain of unplanted wheat, you will be useless.

Christ was pictured by that kernel of wheat. He originally abode alone in transcendent majesty, in infinite holiness and power, seated at the throne of God. Meanwhile, by His word, the heavens had been created, the earth had been fashioned, man had been formed, and then a great tragedy occurred. Man fell, the earth became a wreck, and the world became a wilderness. Now comes a problem. Is it to remain in that condition, or is it to become

fruitful again? If He abode alone, there would be no fruit. If He died, this world again would be fruitful. God was determined that this earth should bring forth fruit. Therefore, Christ Himself died. Until we have beheld Him as the Lamb of God, we have not really seen Jesus Christ.

Notice that the emphasis is upon the dying. Much fruit would never appear except through death. The grain of wheat, or His life, was perfect. For thirty-three years it was examined and found to be perfect. That life stood all critical observation from friend and foe. It never failed in any circumstance or under any conditions. But, apart from death, it would have abided alone. Calvary is its great center, climax and culmination, and it is the great pivot upon which this world's history turns. He was on His way to death, and a few days later He died. A lonely grain of wheat, outside the city gate and on Calvary, He died. Because He died, there was to be much fruit. Death appears to be the seal of failure, but it is the way to usefulness. It appears to be an end, but it is in reality a beginning.

I. The Tragedy We Find.

"It abideth alone." An outstanding weakness in our churches is that so many members are non-propagating and non-producing. It has been said that of the reported church members, 5% do not exist, 10% cannot be found, 20% never pray, 25% never read the Bible, 30% never attend a church service, 40% never give to any cause, 50% never go to Sunday School, 60% never go to a Sunday night church service, 70% never give to missions, 75% never hold any office of service, 80% never go to prayer meeting, 90% never have family worship, and 95% never win a soul to Christ.

There you have it! Grains of wheat abiding alone! Life, but all wrapped up in itself! Life, but no self-giving, no outbursting, no harvest. How honest with yourself are you willing to be? You are a professing Christian, but as you look back across the years that you have known Christ, you know that no other life has been touched and won to Christ through you. As regards winning souls, you are barren. The tragedy is, that by this time you have become content with barrenness. Isn't it a fact that some of you have begun to believe, perhaps have even settled it in your own mind, that getting out and lovingly, intelligently going after others for Jesus Christ isn't your work? You have even tried to dismiss it all by saying, "It's the life that counts." But, alas, today you are secretly haunted by the fear that perhaps even your life isn't counting.

II. The Agony We Fear.

"Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit." Strange as it may seem, here is the real reason for sterility in many Christians: death. There is the agony that makes us flinch. We are not ready to pay the price. We are not quite up to it, even in consent. It is the complete opposite of the self-worship that used to be ours before Christ forgave our sins. What makes it so costly is self-renunciation. It is renouncing self by the very Christian procedure of identifying yourself with the crucified Christ. It is doing, not with mere words, but by faith and in fact, precisely what Paul did when he said, "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me." You and I, as Christians, never can win the battles God wants us to win, or produce the fruit He wants us to produce, until we are self-renounced and Christ-possessed.

This agony of death-to-self, from which we naturally shrink, is a thing to which God brings us by one road or another. Sometimes it is by the gradual and painful realization of the emptiness and barrenness of our present living as Christians. In other cases it is through some heavy blow, some shattering event in our lives, that the crisis of crucifixion is forced upon us. Make no mistake about it, death hurts. To be willing to accept crucifixion with Christ; to leave all yourself, your plans and your longings, your abilities and your possessions, all of them at the cross, so that you only trust and love and live for Christ, hurts a great deal.

III. The Mystery We Face.

"If it die, it bringeth forth much fruit." Follow in your imagination a grain of wheat that is planted, and dies, and lives again. Within its small husk is the starchy substance that forms the bulk of the kernel. But somewhere within that tiny, starchy bulk is a life-germ, too small for human eye to see. Life is there, latent, unfulfilled because unreleased. Now comes the mystery--God's mystery in a realm that we call "natural" but which is teeming with the supernatural. The husk breaks; the substance rots. The germ is torn asunder, and lo, new and larger life begins to sprout.

Who can explain it? No one! We can only describe it, which is a very different thing.

Life out of death is a holy mystery. In the final issue it is God at work, both in a wheat kernel and in a human soul. In the case of the human soul, it is the Holy Spirit of God Who does it--through you. You are privileged to see God speaking His Word through you to some needy soul. You see the blessing of God given in some situation. You see the solution given to a baffling problem, and you know that it is the Lord's doing.

Life out of death is a humbling mystery. What adoration you want to render back to God when through you He brings forth that which in itself was life. As the farmer looks at his crop of golden wheat and rejoices in the harvest which God has given him, so do the Christians who have taken the cross as the rule of their lives. They may speak words of testimony. They may write letters with a spiritual purpose. They may preach sermons designed to be helpful. They may teach lessons to boys and girls who may be either tomorrow's governors or tomorrow's gangsters. Whatever they do, they realize that in the last issue of things only the Spirit of God can give life to the dead, repentance to the transgressor, light to the ignorant and hope to the despairing. When thrilling results take place, the worker's cry of unworthiness and of worship is: "Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto Thy name, be the glory!"

IV. The Certainty We are Furnished.

"If it die, it bringeth forth much fruit." This is God's word of gracious insistence. It is His dependable promise: the broken shall be blessed, the crucified shall conquer, the self-renouncing shall enrich others.

This is God's word of guaranteed increase. When He speaks of the yield that comes from planted grain, He is describing a law of harvest that brings from a single kernel as many as thirty, or sixty, or a hundred kernels. These in turn, when planted, produce yet others in astounding multiplication. What Christ promises is fruit that will bring forth more fruit in its turn.

What we need today is faith to believe in this certainty of harvest. What we need is the holy disgust with ourselves that leads us to renounce, here and now, the conventional, compromising, complacent discipleship with which we have been muddling along. This is God's plan for the world through you. Do not look at far-off fields. Never allow yourself to say, "If only I were not here, but in such-and-such a sphere, in that foreign field, I should be a blessing." No, it is in this spot where God has set you to live and work; in the group in which you have been linked in fellowship--difficult though they may be. God says, "Much fruit there." Do you believe it? The promise is certain: a harvest with much fruit. The cost that is essential is death.