

Our Contributors.

Firstfruits and Fulfilment.*

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"And not only so, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves grow within ourselves, waiting for our adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body."
—Rom. 8:23.

The apostle is speaking to Christians here, and he is speaking to them, you will observe, of their present and past spiritual experiences, and also of their future prospects, the ultimate results. The whole passage is a most striking one, but we confine ourselves today to what is said here in the text. And according to the apostle there are three stages of spiritual experience—the firstfruits of the Spirit, the groanings of ourselves within ourselves, and the hopeful waiting for the adoption, the redemption of the body, the fulfilment.

The Firstfruits of the Spirit.

In a crop there are always some things that ripen long before the rest of the crop. They are the firstfruits of the season. Some things can be sown or planted earlier. Then they grow faster, and come to maturity sooner. That is true of fruits. That is true of roots also, and of grains.

You have noticed, too, in the same field of grain, that some portions would be ready for the sickle, while other portions would be quite green. The reason for that may be found in the nature of the soil, or the lay of the land, or other fortuitous circumstances.

The first ripe fruits of a season are always appreciated. I can remember when a boy in the country, how glad we used to be when the new potatoes came to the table, when the early apples were ready to be eaten, when the first sheaf of grain was reaped. It was an earnest and pledge of what was to follow, and then you always like things that are early, that are first to hand. They may not be as good as some other things that take more time to grow and develop, and so come later, but then they have this advantage, they do not keep you waiting, nor wear out your patience.

The Jews were required to dedicate to the Lord the firstfruits, thus consecrating the whole harvest. The first wheat-sheaf went to the Lord's altar. So with the firstling of the flock. And the firstborn was often specially dedicated and honored.

Now, the Christian has his first experiences, the firstfruits of the Spirit, and just because they are first and earliest, they are of very special interest to himself, and also to all who have an interest in his spiritual welfare. They may indeed be very shallow and disappointing in the end, but just because they are first experiences, the firstfruits of the Spirit, more is made of them, and more interest taken in them, than perhaps is warranted.

And yet let us not despise the firstfruits—the farmer does not. He is glad of them. His experience teaches him not to make too much of them, nor to expect too much from them. Still, he rejoices in them, and hails their coming, and they are to him the earnest and pledge of better things to come, an abundant harvest of good. And so also with the firstfruits of the Spirit.

But you are yourself and others are, and how much harder a thing it is to be a Christian than you thought it would be when you set divine things, our awakening to a knowledge of the truth as it is in Jesus, culminating perhaps in our joining the Church, and the dedication of ourselves to the Lord and His service.

You can look back perhaps to the time when you took little or no interest whatever in religion. Jesus was nothing to you. His House nothing to you. His day nothing to you. The preaching of the gospel nothing to you. You loved the world and lived for it—its pleasures, its companionships, its gains, its interests.

Then there came a time when something happened, you hardly know how or why, but anyhow your eyes were opened, and you saw things differently, felt about things differently. Religion had a new interest to you. You opened your neglected Bible. You knelt in prayer. You began to go to the house of God with a new interest in its services. You listened to the gospel. A sweet and blessed change came into your life. By and by you sought admission to the Lord's Table and fellowship with the Church. You gave evidence of the new birth, repentance, faith, a true conversion, and all that.

Something of such sort, it seems to me, is what the apostle calls the firstfruits of the Spirit. It is the first stage of the spiritual experience, and a most interesting stage it is. Let us not despise it. It is beautiful in its time. It brought the prodigal home to his father's arms. It led Mary to choose the good part. It opened Lydia's heart, so that she attended to the things that Paul spoke. It has led many to ask what they must do to be saved, and has found an answer for them to the great question. Many have turned back at this initiatory stage, and so have failed at the beginning. They have made a false start. Still, let us be glad of the Spirit's firstfruits, and regard them as the earnest and pledge of the full harvest. He that has begun the good work in us is not going to leave it half-completed, but will in due time, bring it to the perfection of the heavenly state, the blessed fulfilment.

The Groaning Within Ourselves.

I call that the second stage of the Christian experience. The firstfruits of the Spirit are often most happy. You see it in the prodigal's return. You see it in the first love. You hear it in the singing and shouting of early conversions. The young convert tells you how happy he is. You can look back to the firstfruits of the Spirit in your own experience, and you can never forget them, nor get away from them altogether, even when, in after years, you wander far from the old faith, amid the fogs of doubt, and the clouds and darkness of unbelief. Oh, you were a happy young Christian, singing like the lark, as you mounted upwards to meet the sun!

But that does not always continue. The blights come. The clouds gather. The rains fall. Oh, the anxious time for the farmer as the ripening is delayed, and much that is full of promise in his fields is pelted down with rain and winds! He has his disappointments, his groanings within himself, his fears, his failures.

So also in spiritual experience. You soon find out how weak you are, how disappoint-

What are the Firstfruits of the Spirit?

I would call them our earliest religious impressions, the beginnings of our interest in out. You begin to fear you made a mistake to make a profession at all, and you are tempted to turn back to the old life. As you look back to it from where you are, you are sure it was better with you then than it is now. The enemy tells you that you are a fool to be a Christian, and indeed you begin to think so yourself. Where is the joy you used to have? Where is the sunshine that lit up your life, and made duty and service so bright and blessed? And so you are flung on your face, and you are filled with groanings and unspeakable bitterness.

But, child of God, that second stage of Christian experience is as necessary as the first. It is to deepen experience. It is to sift out of you the chaff of worldliness. It is the story of every true soul. Jacob had his battle, his groaning and wrestling alone. So had David and Daniel. So had Paul, as with the thorn in his flesh, he groaned and wept and prayed, and wondered what it all meant, after he had seen the unspeakable glory. And think it not strange, if you are sorely tried, and filled with groanings? It is just what you need to make you, build you up, strengthen you. It is a shallow experience that is without it; no depth, nothing substantial and abiding about it. The groanings and agonisings of the soul are as truly the Spirit's dealings with you as the joyous firstfruits. Be not discouraged, therefore, but struggle on, and the morning that broke for Jacob will break for you, and the comfort that comforted the apostle will cheer and comfort you, namely this: "My grace is sufficient for you; my strength is made perfect in your weakness."

The Waiting for Adoption.

This is another stage of Christian experience, a hopeful stage. Adoption—do you know what that is? We are not natural-born children of the Kingdom. We are picked out of the gutter by the grace of God. Now, do not be offended at that. It is true of some as it is not of others, and yet it is true of all, for we are all in the same condemnation naturally, fallen and foul with sin—Oh so fallen and foul!

Some are literally picked out of the gutter. They are found poor waifs, babes flung out to the streets to die there. But the love of Jesus saves them, washes them, heals them, clothes them, feeds them, shelters them, trains them, with a view to adopt them, and to grant them the full rights and privileges of sons and daughters. It would be a mistake to give children, picked out of the gutter, the full rights and privileges of the sons and daughters of a Christian home. They need the experience to fit them for their adoption, and so they are under tutors and governors until they are of age. And their adoption may be delayed, because they are not found fitted for their high estate, and so they are kept waiting.

The waiting for adoption is an interesting spiritual state to be in. It is full of expectancy, every day bringing it nearer, every day fitting us for it, every day developing new graces and enlarging our capacities for the place we are to occupy. It may seem tedious to be kept thus waiting, disappointing, discouraging. But it is not. We are not kept waiting a moment longer than is necessary. Just as soon as we are ready for adoption, and all it means, it is there for us, and so we are advanced to it.

Our present spiritual experience, with its earthliness, its imperfections and infirmities, its physical limitations, its environments and

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