

DEEP IN THE EARTH: CALLED TO DEEP GROWTH

I am not a gardener, yet I am drawn to growing things. I am allergic to pollens and flowers, yet I find green plants fascinating. I am prone to killing plants, yet I am inexplicably drawn to living things. I love staying in my comfort zone, yet I find myself taking classes, reading books, preaching sermons, on things that take me way outside of my comfort zone. Why is that? Because more than anything, I am drawn by a heavenly gardener that wants me to grow; and growing is hard. Usually when we think of growth we think of harvest, yet harvest does not happen until there is death and pruning. We do not like to hear about these parts of the growing process. We want to skip straight to the harvest part and leave all the pain, pruning, and death out of the equation. Today we will look at how the physical life cycle of a plant compares to the life cycle of faith. We are going to look at five parts to the life cycle of a plant: seeding, germination, growing/pruning, pollination, and harvest.

Normally when we think of seeds, we equate them with the gospel, the good news, and our hearts as the soil, like Jesus uses in the parable of the Sower and the Seed in Matthew 13. Today we are going to think of the seed as ourselves and our desires. What in ourselves needs to die so that Jesus can birth something new. Jesus says in John 12, *"I tell you the truth: unless a grain of wheat is planted in the*

ground and dies, it remains a solitary seed. But when it is planted, it produces in death a great harvest.” Unless the seed is planted, there will be no harvest. Unless a seed dies, it is just a seed. In 2008 a date palm was found that they estimate was around when Jesus was 2000 years ago. Seeds were found in the Siberian permafrost that they carbon dated at 31,000 years old. Yet, until those seeds were planted, they were just seeds. Once they were planted, they had the opportunity to grow.

Planting, however, is not where the real change begins. Many seeds are planted, yet not all of them germinate. It is in the germination that the seed both dies and starts to live. Germination needs the right conditions to happen. There needs to be soil and there needs to be moisture. Some seeds need heat to pop open the seed pod so that it can send out its sprout. Different seeds need different planting depths. If you plant a seed too deep, or too shallow, then there is a chance that it will not germinate or mature. That date palm and the seeds found in Siberia were nothing until they were planted and given the right conditions to germinate. They had to die to be able to live. We too, need to die to ourselves to be able to live. I do not know about you, but I find it extremely easy to lie to myself. I can justify just about anything if it gets me what I want. However, that is not what Jesus teaches. We must follow His path. Even Jesus’ path led to death. He had the

power, he had the influence, he had the status as the son of God to get out of dying. He even cried in the garden before the crucifixion, as we see in Matthew 26. Verse 39 says: **Jesus:** *Father, this is the last thing I want. If there is any way, please take this bitter cup from Me. Not My will, but Yours be done.* Jesus does not pray this pray only once. He prays it three times. Jesus knew what he needed to do, yet he still pleaded with God before fulfilling his call. Death is hard. Death to self and our personal desires is hard. Jesus did not do it by himself, and neither do we.

The great thing about death and germination is that roots and a stem are sent out. Once we have died to ourselves, new growth can begin. We want plants to send roots deep into the earth to find water and nutrients from the soil. The leaves stretching up to the light to gain nutrients from the air. We too need to send our roots deep by reading and obeying the Word of God. Our leaves need to stretch out to the Sun of God for the warmth we feel from following him.

If we want our plants to grow well, we need to prune them. There is a story of two neighbors who each bought the same vine, at the same nursery on the same day. Both neighbors planted their vines. One neighbor put stakes on either side of his vine and created a web to hold the vine in the place he wanted it to be. The other neighbor scoffed at his neighbor, calling him cruel and harsh for controlling the growth of his vine. He was going to allow his vine to grow as it pleased. The

neighbor who had staked his vine also pruned it and trained it to grow around the structure that he had built. The neighbor allowing his vine to grow could not understand why his neighbor was taking such pains to prune and train his vine. The vine he was growing was beautiful the way it was. All summer these two vines grew and flourished. In the fall there was a terrible windstorm, and the neighborhood was hit with some pretty serious damage. The neighbor who had staked, pruned, and trained his vine only had a little pruning to do on his vine to fix the damage that the wind had made. The neighbor who had not staked his vine came out to see that his beautiful vine was now in tatters on the ground. There were leaves all over his lawn and the stem of the vine had broken close to the ground. All he could do was dig out his vine and throw it away. How are we tending our vine of faith? Are we building anchors for our faith to grow on? Are we allowing God to prune us so that we grow in the direction that he wants us to? Or are we allowing our faith to grow wild and free? When life's storms come, and they will come, which vine do you think will stand firm and tall? We need to allow God to anchor and prune us.

Our plant has been seeded, it has germinated, and it has grown. Pruning, structure, and training have kept our plant growing well. Now is when we see the flowers coming out, ready for pollination and fruit to grow. Flowers need bees, birds, butterflies, and the breeze to help pollinate them. We need other Christians

to tell us what they see in us. Words of encouragement when we see a fellow traveler floundering. Words of praise when we see each other doing a job well. Words of discipline when we see a fellow Christian taking a wrong turn. These words need to be sincere. No one wants to be flattered and no one wants to be harshly confronted. Yet we also crave those words of encouragement and praise so that we know that what we are doing is being heard or seen. We also need words of correction when we are not travelling the road we should. These are times when we need to lean heavily on the Spirit to know what to say and when. Then all of us can bloom and grow in God's flowerbed.

We are not too big that God cannot chastise us. Look at King David in 2 Samuel 11 and 12. He coveted, he stole, he committed adultery, he lied, and he murdered. Psalm 51 is King David's cry of repentance. He knew he had done wrong; he knew that he needed to confess the sin and make things right with God. He also knew that if he, David, came to God with a repentant and contrite heart that God would forgive him. And God did forgive David. David still had to live with the consequences of his sin. Read the rest of King David's story and you will see how his family came unraveled. Psalm 51 also shows that we are never so far gone that God is not interested in redeeming us. If David can be forgiven, so can

we. We need to be as open with God as David was. Admit we have done wrong, ask God to forgive us, and then change our ways.

After the blooming and pollination comes the harvest. This is the part that all of us look forward to. Eating the produce from our gardens. Enjoying fresh fruit from the trees. Listening to the combines bring in the crop. We always hope and pray that the yield will be good, in the garden and the field. What does a harvest of faith look like? In Jesus' case, it was being given the high priesthood in the order of Melchizedek. For the rest of us, I think harvest is about doing what God has asked us to do. Are we doing the tasks in front of us as to the Lord? Are we preaching, teaching, serving, cleaning the way God has asked us to?

Dying to self is never easy. It is rewarding. Slowly, as we die more and more to ourselves, God writes his words on our hearts. And that is what I want. God's words written on my heart so that I will know him better. That is a harvest worth waiting for. Dying to self is not a once and done thing. We need to come to God daily, maybe even more often, so that our lives can line up with what God wants. May we desire a closer walk with God, that we may die to self, and grow to know God more. Now is the season of planting. May we all have rich harvests.