

Lessons from My Garden

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Introduction.

- A. It is often true that the events and experiences of our physical lives shed light on our spiritual lives. Who, for instance, while sitting in a traffic jam, hasn't thought about the importance of the virtue of patience and how obnoxious it is to actually develop it? Who hasn't seen the love that a father has for his child and not used that as a way to understand the love that our heavenly Father has for us? Metaphors like this are everywhere.
- B. Not surprising, then, is the way that the Bible itself draws on these everyday experiences to provide spiritual illumination. This shows up in unexpected places. For instance, as we were sitting at home this summer, watching the spectacle of athletes from all over the world competing in the Olympic Games, it seldom crossed our minds that we were connecting with our brethren 2000 years ago. Back then, though, they had their own Olympic Games, their own athletic festivals with which just about every Christian would have been familiar. That's why Paul uses those games to explain what it takes to get to heaven in 1 Corinthians 9.
- C. Today, though, I'm going to examine a much less high-flown connection. Historically speaking, most people back in the first century weren't highly specialized employees like us today. Instead, they were farmers. As a result, the Bible is chock-full of farming metaphors. Jesus uses agriculture to explain truths from teaching the gospel to the handiwork of Satan. This too is something with which we can connect. For the first time in my life, this year, I've turned my own attention to the process of persuading plants to grow, and in all the hours I've spent on my knees with my hands in the dirt, I've found that Illinois is fertile soil not just for tomatoes, but for spiritual comparisons. Let's look this evening, then, at some lessons I've learned from my garden.

I. Preparing and Sowing.

- A. The first thing that my gardening has taught me is to **PREPARE THE GROUND**. It's just a part of my personality that whenever I set out to do something for the first time, I take it seriously. I do research on the Internet, I check out books from the library, and I make sure that I know what I'm supposed to do before I do it. In this case, all the experts told me that before I planted my flowerbed, I was supposed to dig the whole thing up, twelve inches deep throughout its entire dimension, loosen up, then smooth out the dirt. That was not a terribly easy task. It took me quite a bit of time, but since I planted that flowerbed, nothing in it that I wanted to live has died. If I hadn't prepared the ground first, I wouldn't have seen that kind of result.
- B. In a spiritual sense, we prepare the ground that we are going to work through prayer. Whether we are trying to improve ourselves or teach somebody else, we need to pray first. Look at the example of the first-century Christians in Acts 13:2-3. Just like preparing the soil before planting helps things grow, as we prepare for our work through prayer, it leads to spiritual growth in ourselves and the entire church. Let's remember to pray.
- C. Second, I learned that **YOU REAP WHAT YOU SOW**. This came up when I went to the nursery near my house in search of purple coneflowers. I wanted three of them for the center of my flowerbed. I bought three plants in the section labeled "Purple Coneflowers," but one of them looked different from the others. I had my doubts about it, but I figured the nursery people wouldn't make a mistake like that, so I planted it next to the other two. As time passed, and it grew bigger, scragglier, and uglier, it became more and more clear that this plant was not, in fact, a purple coneflower. For me, the final straw came when it began to bloom with little flowers that were clearly nothing at all like what I wanted. I dug that weed up and I tossed it. No matter how much I wanted it to be a purple coneflower, I wasn't going to get one, because it wasn't what I planted.
- D. Paul makes the spiritual application plain for us. Look at his words in Galatians 6:7-9. This tells us, friends, that we are always going to see the results that our actions produce. If we never talk to anybody about the gospel, guess what? We're never going to lead anybody to Christ. If we spend our days putting bad thoughts from TV in our heads instead of good thoughts from the Bible, guess what? We're not going to live like the heroes of the Bible. We're going to live like the evil people on TV. Garbage in, garbage out.
- E. Likewise, my gardening has shown me that **SEEDS DON'T SPROUT OVERNIGHT**. I can remember earlier this spring when I planted tomatoes for the first time. For the longest time, it seemed like those plants were doing absolutely nothing. I'd come out to check on them every morning, and they looked just the same as they did the morning before. In just a few months, though, those tomato plants didn't look the same anymore. Some of those staked vines were actually taller than I am! I just needed to be patient with them.
- F. We need to practice that same patience in the spiritual realm. Consider how Jesus describes the good heart in Luke 8:15. The good heart will bear fruit, yes, but only with patience. Almost nothing that is good comes quickly and easily, brethren. It takes time and effort to draw closer to God, and if we try to become better people and expect immediate results, we will always be disappointed. Likewise, hardly anybody is going to demand to be baptized the first time we quote Acts 2. Good will come, but only if we are patient first.

- G. On a sadder note, I also learned that **NOT EVERYTHING WILL GROW**. Earlier this spring, I sowed a bunch of grass seed on some bare patches in my yard, but right now, in those bare patches, I've got mostly crabgrass. This July, I planted five blackberry bushes from my dad, but what I've got right now is four dead sticks and one last plant that's headed that way. Does that mean that I should just give up on getting things to grow and turn my yard into a parking lot? Hardly! Those failures might be an indictment of me as a gardener, and looking back I can see some things I did wrong, but they don't indict the process of gardening.
- H. Likewise, friends, as Christians, we need to learn not to be discouraged by failure, either personally, or especially, in our efforts to teach the lost. Sometimes, people just aren't going to listen. God tells us this with His own words in Romans 10:21. God did everything He could to get Israel to listen, but they repeatedly refused, and friends, if people could refuse God and His miracle-working prophets, they can certainly refuse us! We need to expect that. When things don't work the way we want, it may be that we need to consider what we did and what we can do differently next time, but there's never a call to say God's way doesn't work.

II. Growth and Harvest.

- A. I've also seen that although some things I wanted to grow didn't, some things I DIDN'T want to grow did. In fact, I've seen that **WEEDS DON'T TAKE DAYS OFF**. In that front flowerbed, before I redid it, there was a massive morning glory infestation, and even though I dug that bed up and pulled out all the roots I could find, there's still plenty of morning glory there. I weed that bed once a week and pull up the morning glory from as far down as I can. I've even tried poisoning it with Roundup. But guess what—it's still there, and will be.
- B. On a spiritual plane, sin is the weed that Satan sows in our lives. He doesn't give up and go home just because we're Christians, any more than that wretched morning glory gave up and died once I tried to take its habitat for a flowerbed. As long as we live, there will always be something new and hateful popping up, or something old and hateful re-emerging. That's why we need to listen to the Hebrews writer in Hebrews 12:15. In this specific context, the writer is discussing the sin of idolatry, but this is true generally. The only way to deal with sin in our lives is to be constantly vigilant for its appearance and then to yank it up once it shows itself. Otherwise, if we turn our backs on it and ignore it, we'll have our spiritual gardens overrun.
- C. On the plus side of my physical gardening, though, I've learned that **GOD GIVES THE INCREASE**. I wasn't really all that green-thumbed growing up. My dad and my little sister were the ones who were involved in food production, not me. I understood that it was possible to grow things you eat, but I didn't get it on a gut level until this year, until my tomatoes reached the point where I was able to go outside, pick one off the vine, eat it, and have it be delicious. I'm not the one who's responsible for that. On my own, I might be able to make a tomato-shaped ball of mud, but not a tomato. It was God who caused the vines I planted to bear fruit.
- D. In just the same way, friends, it's God and not ourselves who can make our spiritual efforts successful. Look at Paul's description of this in 1 Corinthians 3:5-6. If you've never personally studied with and converted somebody yourself, this might not be something you get on a gut level, but I guarantee you, it's true. Every time I've done that, without exception, I find myself thinking, "I didn't do anything. I didn't say anything wise or eloquent. I didn't impress them with my immense spirituality. I just had them read some Scriptures, and they wanted to obey the gospel." Folks, on our own, we are even less able to make Christians than we are able to make tomatoes. We might be able to produce a counterfeit, but only God can make the real thing. Our job is just to point people to the word, and then allow the seed of the gospel to do its work.
- E. When that happens, we need to **BE READY FOR THE HARVEST**. I have to admit, friends, that my tomatoes have really taken me by surprise. The stuff I read online said to plant two plants for every person who's eating tomatoes, but my plants produced far more than Lauren and I could eat. I didn't want to get involved in canning them, we didn't have the space to freeze them, so we just had to do our best to munch through them before they went bad. Next year, I'm clearly going to have to think through this harvest thing better.
- F. Likewise, when we sow the word, we have to be prepared for what we get. How do we feel about the idea of our home congregation growing to 150 or 200 people? Does that thought excite us? Do we want to work toward that? Or does the prospect make us unhappy, because we'd prefer for our church to stay just the size it is? From somewhere, a lot of Christians have got the idea that a church is supposed to be small enough that everybody can be friends with everybody, but that's not what we see in Scripture. Look for instance, at Acts 2:40-41. The church in Jerusalem was past the knowing-everybody point by the first day of its existence. We shouldn't fear that kind of growth wherever we are, brethren. We should work for it and welcome it.
- G. Finally, though, my garden has taught me that **WINTER ALWAYS COMES**. My garden looked beautiful all summer long, and into the early fall as well, but it doesn't look beautiful now. We had a hard frost about a week ago that made the perennials go dormant and killed my tomatoes outright, just as happens every year.
- H. Although it's a sobering thought, friends, winter will come for all of us too. The Hebrews writer tells us so in Hebrews 9:27. Unless the Lord comes back first, every one of us is going to be just as dead as my tomato plants in January, and everybody we've ever met will be in that same state. That means, folks, that we need to do good now while we have opportunity, and that we should seek to save others before it's too late.

Conclusion. If you're not ready for the winter of your life, now is the time to prepare by getting right with God.