

God at Work

by Ray C. Stedman

We turn now to The Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians, one of the greatest letters of the New Testament. We will study Chapters 1 through 3, thus completing the exposition of this book begun several years ago with Chapters 4 through 6 – messages which are already available in print (Catalog Numbers 98-116, 119-127, and 130-133).

I hope that, as we begin this doctrinal portion of Ephesians, your heart will be anticipating tremendous truth. I would like to urge you to read this letter through once a week during the time that we are engaged in studying these first three chapters. Read it through in various versions, and in different ways. Read it through at one sitting the first week, and then the next week take a chapter a day. Other weeks read it in some of the paraphrases. Let this truth come to you afresh in new and different language. I can guarantee that if you will do this faithfully until we finish our study you will never be the same person again. This truth has the power to change you, and it will!

I think that, of all Paul's letters, the letter to the Romans and this one to Ephesians have affected me most profoundly. Both are attempts at a systematic and rather exhaustive setting forth of the whole Christian view of life and of the world. Others of Paul's letters deal with specific problems, and they are very helpful when we are involved with those same problems. But these two deal with the whole sweep of truth, the great canvas of God's painting of reality.

Ephesians has changed my life again and again:

- It was from this book that I learned how the body of Christ functions. The truth of the fourth chapter was strongly in my heart when I came to Palo Alto, as a young man fresh from

seminary, and began to pastor a small group of people meeting here. It was the conviction that the ministry belongs to the saints, and that the business of a pastor is to help the people find their ministries and to prepare them to function in them, and to discover the excitement of living as Christians where they are, which was formative in the early years of Peninsula Bible Church and is still so strongly emphasized here.

- It was from this letter that I learned, as a young man, how to handle the sex drive which God had given me, as he has given it to all of us, and how to live properly in a sex-saturated society. This letter is most practical in that way. It teaches us how to come to grips with life as it is.
- This letter taught me profound truths about marriage and about family life. I'm still learning in this area, and have a lot more to learn, but I've already learned a great deal about this subject from the letter to the Ephesians.
- It was this letter which taught me better than any other passage of Scripture how to understand the strange turbulence I often found in my own heart, the spiritual attacks to which I was subject, and how to deal with my fears and anxieties and my depressions – where these were coming from, and what to do about them.

So this is a great and practical letter, and I urge you to become familiar with it and to make it second nature to know the truth of Ephesians.

Let me share with you the experience of another person in this respect. This is from the introduction to a book by Dr. John McKay, for many years the president of Princeton University:

I can never forget that the reading of this Pauline letter when I was a boy in my teens exercised a more decisive influence upon my thought and imagination than was ever wrought upon me before or since by the perusal of any piece of literature. The romance of the part played by Jesus Christ in making my personal salvation possible, and in mediating God's cosmic plan, so set my spirit aflame that I laid aside, in all ecstasy of delight, Dumas' *Count of Monte Cristo* which I happened to be reading at the time. That was my encounter with the Cosmic Christ. The Christ who was, and is, became the passion of my life. I have to admit without shame or reserve that as a result of that encounter I have been unable to think of my own life or the life of mankind or the life of the cosmos apart from Jesus Christ. He came to me and challenged me in the writings of St. Paul. I responded. The years that have followed have been but a footnote to that encounter.

So I would suggest that, if you feel the need for change in your own life and for deepening your relationship with our Lord, you would do well to expose yourself in a very personal way to these teachings from the letter to the Ephesians.

This letter was written about A.D. 61 from Rome during Paul's first imprisonment there. It was written to the Christians in the Roman province of Asia. These were ordinary people – tradesmen, craftsmen, a few doctors and lawyers, some politicians – the general run of people. Many of them were slaves. The letter is commonly called "The Epistle to the Ephesians," but, as a footnote in the Revised Standard Version points out, this is not found in many of the ancient manuscripts. Most have just a blank for the address of these saints. Many scholars, therefore, feel that this is a circular letter which was written to many churches, probably those in the region of Ephesus. Some think it may have been addressed to the very churches to which Jesus had John address the letters in the book of Revelation, beginning with

Ephesus and ending with Laodicea. It may be of interest to you to notice that, in his letter to the Colossians, Paul refers to a letter from Laodicea. Many feel that this is that letter. It was brought from Rome by the hand of Tychicus, to whom the apostle dictated this great treatise. Circulated from church to church, and read in each one, it finally ended up in Ephesus where it was labeled, *The Letter of Paul to the Ephesians*. At any rate, as we gather from Paul's footnote at the end, it is really a letter addressed to all Christians everywhere. You can read it, therefore, as "the letter of Paul the Apostle to the church at Palo Alto, and to the faithful in Christ Jesus."

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are also faithful in Christ Jesus:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. {Eph 1:1-2 RSV}

That is the briefest salutation in any of Paul's letters. There are just three simple things to which I will call your attention in passing:

1. First, Paul's credentials: notice how he describes himself, "an apostle ... by the will of God." An apostle was one sent with a message, a messenger. Paul gloried in the fact that he was an apostle of Jesus Christ. And, as he tells us in his letter to the Galatians, the Lord Jesus appeared to him directly. Paul did not learn what he knew about the gospel by discussing it with the other apostles. Peter and James and John and others of the twelve were never teachers of the Apostle Paul. The truth which he imparts to us here he learned directly from Jesus Christ. And that is his authority. Therefore, when you read Paul you are reading an authorized spokesman for the Lord Jesus. He speaks by the authority of Christ. He makes this clear in all his letters.

I am sometimes amazed at the brazen temerity of people today who will read a section from one of his letters and say, "I don't agree with Paul." Well, that makes me tremble. Paul is speaking as an apostle. An apostle is an authorized spokesman. What he says is what he has heard. So, if you don't agree with Paul, you don't agree with the Lord either! We need to remember that as we come to this letter.

2. Paul was always amazed by the fact that it was “by the will of God” that he was an apostle. He had no other glory in his life than that God, in the amazing wonder of his grace, had called this man who was such a bitter, intense, nationalistic persecutor of the church, had arrested him and changed him, and had sent him out to be an apostle to the Gentiles. Paul could never get over that: “Called by the will of God” – what a mighty influence this was in his life! Now notice that he gives no other credentials. He doesn’t refer to his training at the feet of Gamaliel, nor his Hebrew background and pedigree, nor the brilliance of his intellect, nor any thing else. He simply says, “I’m an apostle by the will of God. That is the ground upon which I write.”
3. Then notice how these Christians are described: “saints who are faithful in Christ Jesus.” *Saints* is a word at which we all shudder a little. We don’t like to be called *saints* because we have such a plaster idea of what a saint is. We think of them as being unreal – so beatific, so holier-than-we, so unlike ordinary human beings. But the saints of the New Testament are not that way; they are people like us. Saints are people who are beset with struggles and difficulties, who have disturbances at home, and problems at work, and troubles everywhere else. They’re normal people, in other words!

But one thing is remarkable about them: They *are* different. That is really the basic meaning of this word *saint*. In the Greek it is a word derived from the word for *holy*. And *holy* means distinct, different, whole, belonging to God and, therefore, living differently. That is the mark of the saint. It isn’t that he doesn’t have problems, only that he approaches them differently. He handles them in a different way. He has a different lifestyle. That is what Paul is talking about here. Their characteristic is that they are faithful, which means, of course, that they can’t quit. That’s what a Christian is – a person who can’t quit being a Christian. A true Christian just can’t stop!

A young man called me this past week to tell me how discouraged he was, how he’d lost his confidence in prayer because he felt that no

answer was coming, and how ready he was to quit. So I said to him, “Well, why don’t you just quit, then? Give up. Stop being a Christian. Try it.” – because I knew that if he did, the first thing he would have discovered is that he couldn’t quit. And he knew it, too. The minute I said that, he acknowledged it: “You’re right. I can’t quit.” That is because, as Paul will describe in this letter, there is imparted to us the Holy Spirit of God, and we are sealed by the Holy Spirit so that we can’t quit! That is a mark of a believer in Christ.

Then comes **the invariable greeting of Paul** to these groups of believers: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” The two great heritages of the Christian are grace and peace. These are two things you can always have, no matter what your circumstances. Grace is all God’s power, all his love, all his beauty available to you. It is a marvelous term which wraps up all that God is and offers to us. It comes from the same Greek word from which we get our English word charm. Grace is charming, lovely, pleasant. It is something which pleases, which imparts charm and loveliness to a life. Peace is freedom from anxiety, fear, and worry. These are the two characteristics which ought to mark Christians all the time:

- Grace – God at work in their life; and
- Peace – a sense of security, of trust.

A man said to me this morning, “You know, I’ve learned something new about trust. Trust is not knowing, and yet still being at peace, at rest.” You see, if you know something, you don’t have to trust. But trust is not knowing, and still being at peace.

From here the letter follows the usual structure of Paul’s letters. First comes the doctrine, the teaching, the great, revolutionary, radical facts that God is setting before us. And then comes the practice, the application, the working out of these in terms of the normal situations of life.

Now, don’t read these first three chapters of this letter as though they were mere theological gas. They are not! They are facts! They are what God says is real. They are what is actually happening in the world, and what is available to you. And if

you once read them that way you won't treat them as merely academic. You'll begin to found your life upon these facts and act upon them. That is why Paul always begins his letters by setting forth the radical facts of life as God teaches them.

Also characteristic of Paul is to gather everything up in one great prefatory statement, and then break it down into its detail. So I'm going to conclude this introductory message by examining the great statement which Paul makes at the beginning of this letter and which gathers up the great themes of Ephesians to which he will return again and again. And then we'll look briefly at these themes.

In Verse 3 we have a tremendous summary of the teachings of this letter:

Blessed by the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places [or, more literally, "in the heavenlies"], {Eph 1:3-4 RSV}

There are four elements in this summary that I want you to note:

1. Paul begins, first, with **the One who is behind all these blessings**, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. That is his starting point. And when a man begins with God you know that what he is going to say is in line with reality. Our problem is we don't start our thinking with God; we tend to start it with ourselves, with our experience, which is only a partial view of truth. Thereby we immediately narrow the range of our vision to what we are going through and what is happening to us, and we don't see this in relationship to the whole reality of life around us. Consequently we get twisted and deformed ideas of what is happening. The only proper way to view truth is to see it in relationship to all truth everywhere. And there is only one way to do that, and that is to start with God. Only God is great enough to encompass all truth.

This is the difference between what the Bible calls "natural" thinking, as done by "the natural man," and the "spiritual" thinking of "the spiritual man." Natural thinking is always limited, always wrong to some degree, because it isn't large enough and broad enough to handle all the facts. But spiritual thinking is al-

ways God-centered, and, therefore, true, and to the extent that it is spiritual, it is true in every way. We need to learn to be spiritual thinkers about ourselves. This is where Paul begins.

2. The second element is **the aim of the work of God**. He sums it up in the twice-repeated word *blessed*: Blessed be God, and blessed are we with every spiritual blessing. That is what God is aiming to do. His goal is to bring about a world, a universe, filled with blessing.

Frequently throughout this letter you find the repeated phrase that everything occurs "to the praise of God's glory," i.e., in order that God should be praised, in order that his people should be so struck by the wonder of what has happened to them that their hearts reflect without limit and without their being able to prevent it – the praise and the glory and the blessing of God. Now, you know that is not new. We all have learned that God is to be praised. We are to give thanks in all circumstances, etc. But most of us think of that as something we must make ourselves do. We have to do this because God needs it, his ego needs to be massaged every now and then by our praise, and unless we praise him he won't operate. He gets upset and mad at us and doesn't run things right, and we have to butter him up a little bit to get him to work. That is really the basis upon which most of us act, at least much of the time, isn't it?

But that isn't what this is talking about at all! It is saying that God has done such remarkable deeds that, if we once understand them, if it once breaks upon our dull intellects what it is that God has already done for us, what is already true of us right now, there will be nothing that we can do but stand in absolute awe and amazement, and say, "You mean that is true of me, Lord? I am overwhelmed! My God, how great thou art!" That is what God is after. That is what he wants to produce – that sense of awe and amazement which causes us to stop and give thanks to a great and glorious God who has given us every spiritual blessing.

In the verses that follow, those blessings are listed for you. We are going to look at them in more detail in subsequent messages, but for now let me just gather them up for you.

- Notice that:

... he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. {Eph 1:4 RSV}

That is Number 1: It goes back before the beginning of time, before the foundation of the universe.

- The second:

He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. {Eph 1:5-6 RSV}

What a fantastic thing that is! We are members of the family of God, made to be partakers of the divine nature.

- Third:

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace which he lavishes upon us. {Eph 1:7-8 RSV}

Think of that! Our guilt is removed, utterly gone.

- Four:

For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. {Eph 1:9-10 RSV}

We have been taken into the secret councils of the Almighty. He has unfolded to us what he plans to do, what he is going to accomplish in the future. We have been told something of the details of this plan.

- Then look at Number 5:

In him, according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will, we who first hoped in Christ have been destined and appointed to live for the praise of his glory. {Eph 1:11-12 RSV}

That is why we are gathered here this morning. God has appointed us to be a demonstration of all these great truths, to live for the praise of his glory.

- Look at the sixth:

In him you also, who have heard the word of truth [Think of that! In this election year when all the politicians are trying to confound and confuse us with words of promise there is a place where you can get the truth, the straight goods, the facts as they are], the gospel of your salvation, and have believed in him, {Eph 1:13a RSV}

All that, you see, comes as a part of the work of the word of truth.

- And then the last:

... were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, which is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory. {Eph 1:13b-14 RSV}

Those are the things that make life worthwhile. Without these great facts, life is unbearable to man, desolate, dull, boring, and we can hardly stand ourselves or each other. This is a list, if you like, of the incompetencies of man. Man cannot provide these. No political party can introduce them. They come from God, and God alone – God at work. No one else can give them to us. It is absolutely impossible that we ever should achieve them by ourselves. They are the gifts of God.

3. The third element of this great verse is that the apostle points out that **all this blessing is “in Christ.”** All this comes to us in Christ, in the

Person and the work of the Lord Jesus himself. This fact is going to be stressed again and again in this letter. No two words appear in it more frequently than “in Christ,” or “in him.” Over and over it is emphasized that everything comes to us through him.

We must learn not to listen to those who claim to have God’s blessing in their lives, and yet to whose thinking Christ is not central. They are deceived, and they are deceiving us if we accept what they say. The only spiritual blessing that can ever come to you from God must always come in Christ. There is no other way that it can come. So if you are involved with some group which sets aside the Lord Jesus Christ and tries to go “directly to God,” and thus claim some of the great spiritual promises of the New Testament, you are involved in a group which is leading you into fakery and fraud. It is completely spurious! For God accomplishes spiritual blessing only in Christ. Physical blessings are available “to the just and the unjust alike,” but the inner spirit of man can be healed and cured only in Christ, and there is no other way.

4. Finally, notice the locale where all this occurs – **“in the heavenlies.”** Now, that doesn’t mean heaven, as we usually conceive it. Paul is talking here about the present experience of these blessings. We are involved with the “heavenlies” right now. These heavenlies, which occur throughout this letter and in other parts of Scripture, are really the realm of invisible reality, of things which are true about life in the world, in the cosmos, but which we can’t see or touch right now. And yet they are very real, and they play an important part in our lives now. This is what Paul refers to in Second Corinthians 4: “We look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen;” {2 Cor 4:18 RSV} – unseen, invisible reality.

Do you remember the story in the Old Testament about Elisha and his servant? They were in a small city one day when they were surrounded by the armies of Syria. The servant looked out upon this vast enemy army and he saw the cavalry and the armed chariots. Fearfully he turned to Elisha and said, “Everything’s hopeless! Look! We’re sur-

rounded, what shall we do?” Elisha said, “Fear not, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.” And he prayed, “Lord, open his eyes,” {cf, 2 Ki 6:15-17}. And the Lord opened the young man’s eyes and he saw ringing the horizon all the fiery chariots of God, manned by hundreds and thousands of angels, and he realized the true situation.

We live in a world where most of the important things of our lives are not visible. They can’t be touched or seen or tasted or weighed or otherwise measured. They are not subject to the scrutiny of science, nor are they available to the philosophies of men, but they are there. We must recognize that fact. And it is in this realm that these great spiritual blessings are to be found. It is here that our life can be changed and we can become different people, by God’s grace. All this will be developed in fuller detail as we go on into the letter.

I want to close by returning to that great initial thought of the Apostle Paul and pointing out to you how he underlines the fact that it is God who does all this. This is not the activity of men that we are talking about. In this first chapter there is no demand for us to do anything. Later on, the question of human activity will come in, but not here. He is talking about what only God can do and what God alone has already done. All progress in the spiritual life comes by understanding a truth which is already true. It is not something that God is going to do, but something he has already done. Therefore it is available to you the minute you understand it and grasp it.

It would be useful for you to take a pencil and underline the finite verbs of this passage. You will notice that they all refer to God. He chose, ... he destined us, ... in him we have redemption, ... he has made known to us his will. Go through the passage and what you will see highlighted is God at work.

All around us in the world today men are doing things, and it is right and proper that they should. Men are to work and to plan, they are to dream and to hope, and they are to try to accomplish things. It is right for the government to try to govern and for statesmen to try to accomplish their goals. All of us have something to do. But what our age has tragically forgotten is that the only activity which

will change anyone ultimately is what God does, not what man does. That is where we need to focus our thoughts. And we need to see what it is that God is doing.

One of these days, we all recognize and know, even though we hate to admit it, all the vaunted, proud, symbols of our civilization as we know it today are going to be brought low, to crumble into dust, to be lost in the debris of the ages. All the knowledge on which we pride ourselves today will be lost in some forgotten tomb. Man's glory shall fade. All the accomplishments of our present day which give us such self-satisfaction will become nothing but obscure references in some future history, if anything at all. And what will endure in that day is the work of God. These great facts, revealed in this letter, will still be as brilliant and untarnished in their reality as they are today. Rudyard Kipling once wrote about the British Empire,

Far flung, our navies melt away, on dune and
headland sinks the fire.
Lo, all our pomp of yesterday is one with
Nineveh and Tyre.

America's greatness is going to fade, as is Russia's, and as is that of all the nations of the earth. But one day, when that day comes, the things which will be true are these great facts. Therefore, if we want to endure, if we want to lift our eyes above the plodding, puny circumstances of our own present experience to the greatness of what God is doing, we must give our attention to these great thoughts – planned before the foundation of the world, begun even before there was an earth, designed to reveal the greatness of God's grace, his compassion, his tenderhearted love, his forgiving ability, his power restore, available through the one Person who in all the scope of history is able to accomplish what no other man could do, Jesus Christ himself, and resulting at last in the healing of all division and the breaking down of every barrier.

That is what Ephesians is all about. It is a story of how God is breaking down division.

We are so aware of division, aren't we? We are divided within our homes, divided in our work, divided into cliques and camps and nations, all against one another, with all the consequent hurt and injury and malice and hate and prejudice. God

is at work to remedy that. He is healing it. He has already begun. He is breaking down the barriers, removing the hate and enmity, restoring and bringing together.

Remember what Jesus said: "All those who are with me gather, and all those who are against me scatter," {cf, Matt 12:30, Luke 11:23}. You can tell whose side you are on by the effect of your life. Are you gathering, or scattering? Are you healing, or hurting? Are you bringing together, or breaking up? Which is the direction of your life? Well, God's great movement in our lives, as individuals, and in history at large, is to heal and make whole, to bring together all things in Christ, to restore harmony once again in his universe.

The exciting thing about that, according to this letter to the Ephesians, is that it has begun already. It has begun in us. We are the first ones to set it forth. We, the church, have felt the force of this great movement of God. We have found it in our homes – the barriers are beginning to break down there, the divisions are beginning to be healed. The harmony is beginning to emerge in our church life. And the more visibly it is evident, the more the world will see God at work. That is what this letter is all about – how to allow this healing flow from the great God behind all things, through his Son Jesus Christ, to touch our individual lives and heal us of all our illness and injury. No wonder this great apostle cries out, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies."

Are you a part of this scheme?

Are you part of this family?

Have you joined the family of God through Jesus Christ our Lord?

If not, you can become a part of it right now. You can say, "Lord Jesus, here I am. I respond to your appeal. Enter my life and make me part of your family."

And if you are already part of it you can give thanks to God.

Prayer:

Once again, our Father, we pray that you will take away the dimness from our vision, the dullness from our understanding, and help us to comprehend these great themes which have changed the history of

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the world again and again as men have grasped them. Save us from the folly of taking them for granted or of giving them no attention. But help us, Lord, young and old alike, to think deeply and seriously about these great statements, to understand

that this is the way that you are acting, this is the course of your movement through history. Lord, help us by thy grace to rejoice, to lay hold of your provision, and to be responsive instruments in your hand; in Jesus' name we ask, Amen.

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The Foundations

by Ray C. Stedman

In the epistle to the Ephesians we are still working together today with the great statement in Chapter 1 in which Paul is setting forth for us the great, fundamental facts of our faith in Jesus Christ. This letter to the Ephesians is really nothing more than a description of the riches that we have in Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul emphasized these riches a great deal. As he traveled about the Roman empire he came to colonies and to cities where people were spiritually and materially impoverished – they were poverty-stricken people. Many of them were slaves. They had nothing of this world's goods. They were depressed, discouraged, beset with fears and anxieties, jealousies and hostilities. They were under the grip of superstition and filled with the dread of the future. They had no hope of life beyond death. And it was the apostle's great joy to unfold to them the riches available to them in Jesus Christ – riches which, if accepted as facts, would free them, would transform them and make them over into wholly different people, would bring them into a sense of joy and love and faith and radiant experience. That happened again and again. So the apostle gloried in these exceeding great riches in Jesus Christ.

The epistle to the Ephesians ought to be a treasure store to which we go repeatedly anytime we get discouraged.

I remember reading years ago about an old Navajo Indian who had become rich because oil had been found on his property. He took all the money and put it in a bank. His banker became familiar with the habits of this old gentleman. Every once in a while the Indian would show up at the bank and say to the banker, "Grass all gone, sheep all sick, water holes dry." The banker wouldn't say a word – he knew what needed to be done. He'd bring the old man inside and seat him in the vault. Then he'd bring out several bags of silver dollars and say, "These are yours." The old man would

spend about an hour in there looking at his money, stacking up the dollars and counting them. Then he'd come out and say, "Grass all green, sheep all well, water holes all full." He was simply reviewing his resources, that's all.

That is where encouragement is found – when you look at the resources which are yours, the riches, the facts which undergird your faith. As we go through this letter to the Ephesians I hope you will read it in that way.

Last week we looked at the summary statement with which Paul gathers up the great themes of this letter:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, {Eph 1:3 RSV}

Then we took a quick survey of the list of these great spiritual blessings which follows. We are going to spend more time with that in coming Sundays. If you want to keep the structure of this chapter in mind, remember that we have this summary statement, then the more detailed description of the blessings, Verses 4 through 14, and then, beginning with Verse 15, Paul's great prayer that his hearers would understand what this is all about.

There is an unusual structure in this passage to which I'd like to call your attention. From Verse 3 through Verse 14 in the Greek text (not in the English) you have one complete, unbroken sentence filled with many adjectival phrases brought in to amplify and enrich it. If you want to get the effect of it, take a deep breath and try to read it through with one breath. You will see how much Paul has crammed into this great sentence. It's almost as though he is taking a walk through a treasure chamber, like those of the Pharaohs of Egypt, describing what he sees. He starts out with the most immediate and evident fact and tells us what that is.

Then something else comes into view and he puts that in. And glory flashes upon glory here until he has this tremendously complicated sentence which includes vast and almost indescribable riches.

That is Paul's way of showing us how truth is interconnected, how you can never touch upon some of these great themes but that they lead to others, and soon you find yourself caught up with still others. That is how truth is, isn't it? Truth in nature is like that also. You can't study one subject in nature without touching upon a great many others. This is the way God builds truth. There is a rather simplifying division of this passage, however, such as is always present whenever the apostle states something like this. That is, these blessings gather about the Persons of the Trinity. There is the work of the Father, the work of the Son, and the work of the Holy Spirit.

In Verses 3-6 you have the work of the Father:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. {Eph 1:3-6 RSV}

Then, in Verses 7-12, you have that which relates to the Son:

In him [the Beloved] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace which he lavished upon us. For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In him, according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will, we who first hoped in Christ have been destined and appointed to live for the praise of his glory. {Eph 1:7-12 RSV}

How rich that language is concerning the Son, our relationship to him, and our present experience!

Finally, in Verses 13 and 14, you have the work of the Holy Spirit:

In him you also, who have heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and have believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, which is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory. {Eph 1:13-14 RSV}

Remember that these are all available to us in the realm which Paul calls "the heavenlies." As we saw last week, that is not heaven; it does not mean going to heaven when you die. We get such distorted concepts of heaven! I confess to you that heaven, as most people envision it, is not an attractive place to me – damp, rainy clouds, unstrung harps out of tune, white robes, and all that. A good travel folder could make West Texas look preferable to heaven. And yet most people think that this is what Paul is talking about when he speaks of *the heavenlies*.

No, "in the heavenlies" is a reference to the invisible realities of our life now. It reaches on into eternity, yes, but it is something to be experienced now, in the inner life. That is what he is talking about – your thought-life, your attitudes, your inner life where you live, where you feel conflict and pressure, struggle and disaster – that is part of the heavenlies. It is where we are exposed to the attack of the principalities and powers which are mentioned in Chapter 6, those dark spirits in high places who get to us, and depress us, and frighten us, and make us anxious or hostile or angry. The heavenlies is the realm of conflict, but also the realm where God can release us and deliver us, where the Spirit of God reaches us at the seat of our intellect and our emotions and our will. It is the realm of those deep, surging urges which rise within us and create either a restlessness or a sense of peace, depending on the source from which they come. So don't read this as though it were something out in space somewhere. These blessings are yours in your inner experience, now, if you are in Jesus Christ.

Obviously, all of this, as we saw last week, comes to us in one great package "in Christ." If you are not a Christian you cannot possibly claim these benefits. They are not yours, they don't belong to you. You cannot buy them, you cannot discover them, you cannot sign up for a course

about them in a university. You can't send away ten dollars in the mail and get a pamphlet that will lead you to them. There is no way you can appropriate them unless you are in Christ. But if you are "in Christ" there is nothing to keep you from having all of them, every moment of every day. That is why it is so important that we discover what they are.

You see, these are much more than mere doctrinal ambiguities, mere theological ideas. They are facts, foundational truths which undergird us in every moment of our life. And, unless you understand those facts, you can't utilize them, you can't benefit from them. In that way they are like natural laws. The laws of nature operate regardless of how we feel – they are impersonal in that respect.

I've been doing a bit of electrical work in an addition to my home, and I've discovered that electricity follows a pattern of its own and takes no notice of how I feel at the moment. That can be a shocking experience! It is not in the slightest degree impressed with my position as a pastor of Peninsula Bible Church. It doesn't hesitate to retaliate for any violation of its laws that I commit. It is up to me to discover how it works, and then to respect it, if I want to utilize it.

The same thing is true of these great facts. They will do you not a particle of good if you don't discover what they are and believe them enough to operate on the basis of them. That is why we are having this study together.

We couldn't possibly cover in one message all that is wrapped up in these great truths, and I don't want to attempt it. We want to take our time going through this passage so that we might grasp these fundamental facts. So I would like to center this morning on the two great facts which are mentioned here concerning the work of the Father.

1. Take this first statement:

... he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. {Eph 1:4 RSV}

Here we are dealing with what theologians call the doctrine of election, i.e., the fact that God chose us to become Christians and to be in Christ before the very foundation of the world. If you begin to try to understand that truth,

your mind will boggle. That is a fantastic statement, isn't it? We struggle with it, we question it, and therefore I submit to you that we really don't believe it, because oftentimes it doesn't show up in our actions, which is where the proof of our belief comes. We say, "How could this be? How could God choose us, and yet still offer a choice that we must make?" And thus we sense the struggle between the doctrines of the free will of man and the sovereign election of God.

Many have wrestled with this great truth and have tried to explain it with various suggestions:

- Some say, "Well, God can foresee the future, so he looks down and sees that we are going to make a choice, and on the basis of seeing what we will determine to do he then says, 'All right, I'll elect them to be part of my process.'" That sounds very simplistic, and it is, because it is not what the Scriptures say.
- Some say, "Well, God sees what we will be when we become Christians. He sees the value that we will have toward him, and so he chooses us on that basis." Again, nothing could be more unscriptural than that idea!

You see, it *is* true that we are chosen of God. In John 6, Jesus said so himself. He said, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him," {John 6:44 RSV}. That's putting it plainly, isn't it? You can't come to Christ unless you are drawn by the Father. God has to initiate the activity. Ah, yes, but in Matthew 11 Jesus made his appeal directly to the will of the individual, saying, "Come unto me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest," {cf, Matt 11:28 RSV}. And that means it's up to you. You can never become a Christian until you choose to come. So both of these facts are true.

And though we can't reconcile them in our puny intellects, nevertheless we can accept them as facts and realize that it is true that we must choose. The good news is offered to us, but if we don't respond we will never obtain

the benefit of it. But if we do respond, if we come to Christ, if we believe in him, then we discover a great fact: God began the process, it was he who chose us, and we have been drawn to him by his Spirit at work in our spirit. That is amazing, isn't it? But it is the first thing that Paul wants us to know.

And then we struggle with the timing of this: "before the foundation of the world." Before we existed, before we ever took form seminally, let alone actually, we were chosen in him. Before there was an earth, no matter how far back in time you put it – billions of years, squillions of years into the past – yet the statement stands that you and I, as the very persons we are among the billions of people we could have been, were chosen in him. How could that be? Do you see how that boggles the mind? We must realize that we are dealing with an Eternal Being, one with whom there is not past or future, but only an eternal present, only one great *now* who therefore reads our future as clearly as he does the past, who determines all things by the counsel of his will, as the next verse has it, and brings them to pass so that they all work together to accomplish what he wants done. And we can only sit in amazed wonder and say, "Lord, how great thou art!"

"Chosen in him before the foundation of the world!" Do you see what that does for our sense of identity as Christians? We are not afterthoughts in God's working. We are not accidental members of his body. There are no second class citizens in the church of Jesus Christ; we are all equal, chosen of the Father, selected to be members of his family, added to the new creation, the new order that God is producing in this world. What a fantastic privilege! It is not because of anything in us, as we'll see in a moment, but because of everything in him.

The purpose of all this is that we are to be holy and blameless. God says that he chose us for that reason, that we might be holy and blameless!

Now, I'd like to ask a question: How many of you here are holy? Raise your hands, would you? Yes, we do have a few. Well, what's the matter with the rest of you?

I submit to you that these great facts are so revolutionary, so radical, that we hesitate to believe them! We hesitate to apply them to ourselves despite the fact that they are true. The reason we hesitate is that we have such distorted ideas of what these words mean. We think that holiness is sanctimoniousness and that it results from a kind of theological de-worming process we must go through, and we don't want to claim that for ourselves. But it is not that at all. As we have seen in our studies in Leviticus, *holiness* means "wholeness," and *wholeness* means "to be restored to the originally intended functioning," to be put to the proper use, that's all. Physical wholeness prevails when the body works the way it was supposed to. And when your whole being functions the way it was intended to do, you are holy.

Now how many of you have had your whole being restored to proper functioning? You may not always function properly, but you have the capacity to do so. Ah, that's better! There are even more holy people here than I thought! It is when we begin to understand these words that we can apply them and accept them.

Now let's look at the other one, *blameless*. Most people refuse to think of themselves as blameless because they know that they have done many things for which they ought properly to be blamed. That is, they have made choices, deliberately, against light, against knowledge of the results. They have purposely done that which they knew they ought not to have done. They could have done otherwise but didn't. And who is not in that boat? Therefore they feel they are to be blamed. But they are confusing this word with another, because it is not sinless. Never having done anything wrong is sinlessness. But you can be sinful and still be blameless. Do you know how? By handling your sin in the right way.

If you did something that injured someone else, and the full result of it was not visible to you when you did it but afterward you saw how much you had hurt the person, and you acknowledged it, apologized to them, did what you could to restore it, then there would be nothing further you could do, would there? And from that point on you would be blame-

less. You would not be *sinless* – you still did it – but you also did all you could to handle it rightly.

The idea is the same with our offenses against God. What can you do about your sins, your evil? You can't go back and straighten it all out, no, but you can accept his forgiveness. You can acknowledge your need. You can put it back into his capable hands to straighten out the results. And when you've done that, you're blameless!

How many blameless people are here today? Yes, that's better. And that is what God has chosen us to do – to learn this wonderful process of being whole and blameless.

Notice that these things are to be reckoned true even though we don't feel that way. That is the way it is in nature also.

You get up in the morning and look at the sun and say, "The sun rose this morning." It looks as though the sun were traveling around the earth. But you know better than that, don't you? You look out across the landscape and it looks flat, and you say, "The earth must be flat." No, you know better. Even though you can't see that the earth is round and revolves around the sun, you have learned to accept these facts despite your feelings.

That is exactly what we are called on to do here. Accept the fact that God chose you in Christ to make you holy and blameless. And as you walk before him in his prescribed way, that is what you are. And then rejoice in that great fact.

2. Now look at the second great aspect which is recorded of the work of the Father, and which is related to the first,

He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. {Eph 1:5-6 RSV}

Here is a partial explanation of how God takes care of all the past failures and the shame of our lives, in order to produce someone who is holy and blameless. It is by means of a change of family relationship. "He destined us to be sons," or, literally, he "foreordained us to

sonship standing," or, as the Authorized Version puts it, to "adoption" as sons.

We are familiar with the process of adoption. Adoption means leaving one family and joining another, leaving behind all that was involved in the first family and assuming the name, the characteristics, the resources, the history of another family. And this is the way Paul describes this relationship.

We all belong initially to the family of Adam. We leave it, in Christ, and, thereafter, we belong to a new family, the family of Jesus Christ. We are no longer part of the family of Adam. Now that doesn't mean that we are not human; it means that we no longer need to be possessed by fallen Adamic characteristics. We are still exposed to temptations to believe in them and to act that way, but we don't have to – that's the point. We've been transferred into a new family.

And, more than that, the emphasis is upon living as a full-grown, mature, responsible son. We are not put into this family as mere babes; we are put in as mature, grown-up children. As soon as we grasp the truth we can exercise it. In other words, to put it very simply, we are to live exactly as Jesus lived. He was a Son, the Son of the Father, and, as such, a certain way of life was his. And now we have it too, in him, living exactly as he did.

This is how Jesus described his own life: In John 6, he said, "I live by means of the Father," {cf, John 6:57}. That is, "The Father is my resource, my wisdom, my strength, my power. The Father is the secret of how I act, and what I do, and where I go. The Father is living in me, and working in me. And in everything I do, it is not I; it is the Father." He went on to say, "And as I live by means of the Father; so he who eats me [that is a beautiful figure for partaking of Christ, trusting in Christ] will live by means of me," {John 6:57 RSV}. That is the secret of the Christian life. What a beautiful way to live! By the same method that Jesus lived, in the same way that he arrested the attention of humanity – this is the way that we are called upon to live. We have been made sons in him, like him, so as to share his life. It is this, you see, that pleases the Father. Isn't that amazing?

The rest of the statement deals with the *why* and *how* of this:

- Why should this be so?

Most of us struggle with believing it because we say, “Why me? Why should he see anything in me which would motivate him to do that?” And, of course, that is our problem.

It isn’t that he sees anything in us. We make a serious error when we think that there is something in us which God is after. No, it is not anything in us. The ground of his choice is the kind of God he is. There are three elements of it here:

- “He destined us in love to be his sons ...”
- “According to the purpose of his will, ...”
- “To the praise of his glorious grace ...”

It is entirely God, isn’t it? His love began it, so he purposed it, literally, according to “the good pleasure” of his will, i.e., it gives him pleasure to do so, and all to the final end that it results in joy, in praising him, throughout all creation – “to the praise of the glory of his grace.”

I think I saw a taste of that at Explo ‘72 in Dallas a few weeks ago. The thing above all else that impressed everyone who came to Explo was the fact that all over the city there was an outburst of joy. It was infectious. There was a spirit of cheerful happiness no matter what happened. The young people, particularly, went all over the city and met everything and everyone with a smile or a “Praise the Lord!” Even the gruff old police of Dallas were impressed by this. One policeman said, “I’ve been treated like a human being for the first time in my career,” and he couldn’t get over the fact that it was young people who were treating him this way. Another, a guard at the Cotton Bowl, said, “I’ve been shoved 22,000 times this week, and everyone said ‘Excuse me’ when they did it.” Why? Because the joy was born of God. It was not coming from the circumstances – they were unpleasant, at times. Kids were living in tents, and sleeping on the ground, and often didn’t have enough to eat. I met some who hadn’t eaten for

two or three meals, but their joy was undiminished. I watched the rain pour down upon thousands of them in the Cotton Bowl, and not one of them complained; they just enjoyed it thoroughly. That is what God is after – to increase joy.

A few days ago one of the women of this church came to me. It was an ordeal for her to come because she is in pain constantly. She told me of some of the struggle this has meant in her own life, of how she has cried out, “Why?” and has been assaulted with temptations to bitterness and resentment because she can’t do what she’d like to do. She told how this all reached a crisis about a year ago when she finally said, “Lord, I can’t take this! It’s too much for me! But, Lord, you seem to expect me to take it. No matter how much I pray, nothing seems to happen. But I just can’t do it. So I give it back to you, Lord. If I’m even going to be able to exist, you’ve got to do it. You’ve got to uphold me, and somehow you’ve got to make me able to obey you and to reflect what you want me to be.” And she said that there was born in her heart a sense of joy she couldn’t explain. But for over a year now (and that is an adequate test, isn’t it?) that joy has remained. And the radiance on her face as she told me about this was sufficient evidence that she was not trying to pull my leg. Joy, unbroken joy – the praise of God’s glorious grace – in the midst of pain and suffering, disappointment and frustration.

That is what God is after. That is what he is training us for. He has destined us to be that kind of sons, because that is the kind his Son Jesus Christ is, according to the purpose of his will.

- Finally, there is just one word on *how*, and this introduces the next section which we will take up in our next time together. How did this come to us?

It was “freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.” God “engraced” us, is the word. He came to us in Christ, he poured it all out in Christ. Jesus was sent of the Father. That is the mark of his love. He came to be poor, he came to be misunderstood, to be opposed and hated, to be spat upon, to be cruelly beaten and finally crucified, so that we might be rich.

Remember how Paul puts it in Second Corinthians 8:

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. {2 Cor 8:9 RSV}

Now, my question is: Are you enjoying your inheritance?

Do you wake in the morning and remind yourself at the beginning of the day,

- “I’m a child of the Father.
- “I’ve been chosen by him to be a member of his family.
- “He imparts to me all the richness of his life.
- “His peace, his joy, his love are my legacy, my inheritance from which I can draw every moment of life. And have them no matter what my circumstances may be.”

Do you reckon on these unseen things which are real and true? – because, if you do, when you trust in God’s grace to be your present experience, you can know of yourself what the Father said three times about his Son Jesus. God the Father, looking down at you can say, “This fellow here, this girl there, this man, this woman – this is my beloved child in whom I am well pleased.” *That* is our inheritance.

Prayer:

Our heavenly Father, we thank you for these vast truths. We pray that our understanding may be made equal to them. We can’t grasp them properly apart from the work of your Spirit, and we pray that you will open our eyes and help us to see that these things are true indeed, that they undergird our lives. And as we venture out upon them, as we dare to apply them to ourselves, you will take them and make them lead us into the liberty of the children of God, so that we will be free men and women, free despite the circumstances under which we live, and despite the people with whom we have to work. We are a free people. We thank you in Jesus’ name, Amen.

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Liberated!

by Ray C. Stedman

In this first chapter of Ephesians we are trying to understand thoroughly the basic, foundational facts which underlie our faith and, therefore, underlie the experience of our lives. After all, what we are examining here is not mere theological doctrine; it is a revelation of things as they really are. It is the way God runs his universe. And to believe it and to act upon it is to return to reality, to become realistic once again.

We are working in this chapter with the great statement of Paul in which, in fourteen verses, he gathers up in one long sentence a number of fantastic truths centering around the work of God on our behalf. We looked together last time at the work of the Father, trying to understand something of what is meant by the words, "... he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him" {Eph 1:4 RSV}, that almost incredible fact that somehow, by dint of God's nature as an eternal Being, he was able to see us long before the world ever came into being, and not merely as a possibility but as an actual person, to see us as we are, in our need, and to choose us to be holy and blameless, to be healed, by him. Then he "destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, ... to the praise of his glorious grace," {Eph 1:5-6 RSV}. He moved to initiate the activity which would reach us. He chose us to be his sons, decided to adopt us into his family and to make us partakers of his own nature. These are fantastic concepts!

As we come to Verse 7, we move in this great passage to the work of the Son. We see how the Son of God, the second Person of the Trinity, now moves actually to accomplish what the Father decided upon. The act of deciding was the Father's; the act of accomplishment is the Son's. The first stage of his action is given to us in Verses 7-8:

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, ac-

ording to the riches of his grace which he lavished upon us. {Eph 1:7-8 RSV}

A number of weeks ago, when I was working through this passage, I chose the title, *Under Construction*, because I was so impressed with the fact that all that is happening here is still going on. It is not something true only of our past; it is happening in our present. You can hear the sound of the sawing of boards and the pounding of nails. The construction activity is going on as God is building his church in the midst of the world today. You probably have seen that button given out at the Basic Youth Conflicts seminars which has the letters PBPGINTWMY on it. It is designed, of course, to evoke the question, "What does that mean?" The answer, obviously, is

PLEASE BE PATIENT, GOD IS NOT THROUGH WITH ME YET.

It is true that we are under construction. It's still going on, still happening. But I have decided to change the title because of one Greek word which appears in this passage. It focuses so marvelously on the first stage of this that I'd like to use it. It is translated *redemption*: "we have redemption." But I don't want to use that term. It has become "theologized," which is another word for partially decayed! It has lost its meaning. I'd like to use a modern equivalent: "we've been *liberated*." That's the idea. We've been liberated, set free. That is what the apostle is trying to bring home to us.

The picture presented by this word, and others like it in Scripture, is that of a slave market, a common sight in the Roman Empire, where human beings were offered as chattel for sale to anyone who could pay the price. And Paul's idea is that here we were, bound as slaves in a great slave market. And Jesus came, paid a price, bought us, and restored us to usefulness. Anything in a slave market is of no use at all. Until a slave is purchased he is no good to anyone. And so this is the picture of

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a slave purchased and freed in order to be useful and fruitful to someone.

We still use the word *redeem* in that sense in connection with a pawn shop. I don't know how many of you have had the experience of having to pawn something. When I was a student at Dallas Theological Seminary, I used to spend my summers at Pasadena working in the Lincoln Avenue Presbyterian Church. We would drive out at the end of a school year to begin work there. As was always the case in those days we had very little cash. It took all our accumulated savings to buy the gasoline to make the trip. We always arrived absolutely flat broke. Usually we had spent the last of our money four or five hundred miles back and had gone without a couple of meals and slept in the car. There would be a week, or sometimes two, until my first check arrived. And so I always had to pawn something. The only thing of value I had, beside my wife, was my typewriter. So the first thing I did in Pasadena was to take my typewriter down, and pawn it. The pawnbroker and I had become good friends as the summers went by. We would live on that money until my first check came. Then I'd redeem the typewriter. Now, for that two-week period the typewriter was absolutely useless to anyone. No one could use it. I had no right to use it; the pawnbroker had no right to use it. He couldn't sell it to anyone else. It was in hock, in pawn. It was useless, absolutely useless. That is the picture that Paul gives here. When I bought the typewriter back, *redeemed* it, it was restored to usefulness.

I wonder if you ever think of yourself that way? In our natural human condition we are useless for whatever God has designed us for. There is no way by which we can achieve the sense of fulfillment that we long to have.

I know a lot of people who resist this idea. They say, "Look at non-Christians. You talk as though only Christians have any achievement, but look at the non-Christian world. Look at how skilled, talented, and able men are, at how many things they can do, and how significant it all is. Why do you talk like this?" Well, what Paul is saying here is that there is a considerable difference between achievement and fulfillment. Yes, you can achieve a lot of things, but they don't satisfy. There is no sense of usefulness; it all seems to be wasted. There is within you a kind of subtle, haunting reminder of the fact that this is all going

to disappear some day, that you are contributing to that which is only going to blow up in the end and, in any enduring sense, it is a waste of time. That is what Paul is talking about.

I remember years ago teaching a home Bible class in Newport Beach. The host and hostess invited their neighbor from across the street. He was an outstanding engineer, a brilliant man, who prided himself upon his own accomplishment. He had told them on several occasions that he had no need of God, no need of religion in his life. But he consented to come this evening because, as he told them, he'd be the Devil's Advocate. He came in a little late – the class had already started and I was already speaking – and he announced himself. With a little obvious arrogance, he said, "I'm so-and-so from across the street, and I've come in to be the Devil's Advocate." I said, "Well, you're welcome. Curl your tail around the chair, and sit down. We'll be glad to have you." He spent most of the evening challenging all the statements that were made, trying to disprove them. But it was obvious that there was a hunger there nevertheless – at least some curiosity.

I had a number of contacts with him afterward. At one point he even evinced enough interest to come up here to this area and spend time in some of our classes, and I talked with him individually at great length. But he always insisted that he didn't need God at all.

Just a few months ago I learned that he had discovered that he had cancer, and we were all praying for him, that God would use this to show him that his achievements, in the light of that which is enduring, were worthless. What he really needed and really wanted his money and his brilliance could never buy. We hoped that this would be accomplished, but just this last week I got word that he had committed suicide. A tragic end, but eloquent testimony to what Paul is trying to say to us here.

Achievement is not fulfillment; but when Christ comes in there is fulfillment.

You see, in our natural humanity we are essentially useless for the purpose for which God ordained us and designed us. We are forlorn, abandoned, without practical value, though obviously with great potential, but unable to find fulfillment.

Now, into this slave pit, says Paul, Jesus came, and he struck off our fetters and set us free. He liberated us, and restored us to useful, fruitful,

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eternally significant living. That is what it means to be liberated.

In Texas this past week, we had with us a delightful young man who was the only one in the group who had a long flowing beard and hair to his shoulders. He was a choice young man. He gave his testimony one evening and recounted how, just two years ago, following the pattern of so many youths up and down the West Coast, he had gotten into drugs. He was blowing his mind with heroin and LSD and other things, had tried to find satisfaction in sexual escapades of all types, and had sought some sense of significance in a commune living up in the mountains in back of San Bernardino. There, in the midst of his dreary, lonely, desperate life, somebody told him about Jesus. He told us that, in just a flash, it dawned upon him what Jesus had done. It was as though scales fell from his eyes, and immediately he was delivered, liberated. He never went back to drugs from that moment. He cleared up his sex life, and straightened out other areas. And the joy and the radiance with which he told this story gave ample evidence that the glory of this liberation was still with him, he was enjoying the fullness of it.

What is it that happened, specifically, when we were forgiven, when we were redeemed, liberated? Paul amplifies it for us in this verse. He says,

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, {Eph 1:7a RSV}

That is what happened. Our trespasses, our sins, were forgiven. The Greek word for *trespasses* is a word which means our “missteps,” our “stumbleings,” our tragic, hurtful blunderings, in which we think we are doing something that will fulfill us, but it ends up wrong, devastating, deadening, and we wind up bitter and disillusioned. But those stumbleings have been forgiven. The Greek word for *forgiveness* means “dismissed.” They have been set aside. They are no longer considered or taken into account, they are ignored.

Here Paul is putting his finger on the chains which bind us in our enslaved condition. It is our guilty awareness of these deliberate acts and choices that operates to make us hide from God, and also from each other – and even from ourselves. It is our remembrance of these wrongful deeds that does it. We begin to withdraw because

we don't feel we'll be accepted. We think we're not acceptable to God because of our evil deeds, and we begin to feel uncomfortable about ourselves. We can't feel comfortable in the presence of others unless we know that they have done the very same things we've done. And so life begins to become reclusive. We try to become self-sufficient. We don't want to be dependent upon anyone else. We become secretive, suspicious, independent, private, and thus also lonely and hurt, resentful, bitter and despairing. That is the pattern on which life is lived all around us, and which we know so well in our own experience.

But when Jesus comes into our lives he dismisses these trespasses. They are forgiven, set aside, and we hear him say to us, as he said to that unfortunate woman taken in the very act of adultery, “Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more,” {cf, John 8:11}. Now how could he say it? On what ground could Jesus ever utter a sentence like that? How could he remain just and consistent with himself and yet set aside our guilt so completely? And the answer, Paul says, is “through his blood.” That is how it happens. All through the Scriptures you find that there is no forgiveness from God apart from that shameful episode of the cross.

The cross is not a pleasant thing. Blood is not pleasant. It never is. It is sticky, messy, sickening. There are people who cannot stand the sight of blood. And this whole business of a bloody Savior is offensive to most people, because they do not understand why God insists upon blood before there is forgiveness. And yet there is no other way. Scripture is unanimous in its testimony – “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins,” {cf, Heb 9:22}. Why? Because it is the blood that underscores the reality of our guilt. Jesus died because we deserved to die. And we really do deserve to die; that's the whole point! We are not merely well-intentioned people accidentally stumbling along into trouble. We know that somewhere, somehow, we are involved in these deeds – and deliberately so – and thus we deserve the judgment of God. Our consciences tell us this; we can't escape them.

Jesus died because he took our place. That is what the Scripture announces. He was not merely a substitute. It is always difficult for us to understand how an innocent person can die for a guilty one, and set him free. But the Scriptures do not

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really teach that he was only a substitute, in that sense. There is an identity involved. What Scripture says is that he actually became us: "He who knew no sin, was made sin for us," {cf, 2 Cor 5:21}. And when he became what we are, God put him to death, because that is what we deserve. Scripture honestly faces right up to the fact of our guilt.

There is an idea abroad today that the gospel is considered good news because it tells us that men are not really to blame for their misdeeds. There is a school of behaviorism today which says that we can't help ourselves for what we did; we are the victims of our circumstances, or of our genetic makeup. Our genes are responsible, our pressures, our parents. It's not our fault. We had to do what we did. There was no way we could avoid it. But I want to say that if that is the case, then we are of all people most miserable. There is no escape from our guilt, because there is something deep within the human conscience which will not buy that proposition, will not settle for it. Our conscience continues to hunt us even though we try to repress it, and so we never can find the peace that we're looking for. We know we're guilty. We know that we've consented willingly to these pressures, that we didn't just give in because it was the most convenient thing to do; we wanted to do it. We wanted to go along, and we would have resisted attempts to stop us at the time we did so. And we know that is true. That is the reason there is no escape from a guilty conscience apart from the blood of Jesus, because it alone faces guilt squarely and does something about it.

Some time ago I ran across a quotation from Dorothy Sayers, who has done some very keen thinking in the area of theology, and I want to share this with you because it is very apropos. She says,

One of the really surprising things about the present bewilderment of humanity is that the Christian Church now finds herself called upon to proclaim the old and hated doctrine of sin as a gospel of cheer and encouragement. The final tendency of the modern philosophies, hailed in their day as a release from the burden of sinfulness, has been to bind man hard and fast in the chains of an iron determinism. The influence of heredity and environment, of glandular makeup and the control exercised by the unconscious, of economic necessity and the mechanics of biological devel-

opment, have all been invoked to assure man that he is not responsible for his misfortune and therefore not to be held guilty. Evil has been represented as something imposed on us from without, not made by us from within. The dreadful conclusion follows inevitably that as he is not responsible for evil; he cannot alter it. Even though evolution and progress may offer some alleviation in the future there is no hope for you and me now. I well remember how an aunt of mine, brought up in an old-fashioned liberalism, protested angrily against having continuously to call herself a miserable sinner when reciting the Litany. Today, if we could really be persuaded that we are miserable sinners, that the trouble is not outside us but inside us, and that therefore, by the grace of God, we can do something to put it right, we should receive that message as the most helpful and heartening thing that can be imagined.

That is exactly what Paul is saying. The gospel emphatically does not say to us that we are not guilty, not to blame. What it says is that we are to blame. It faces us squarely with our guilt, our complicity, our willing cooperation with the forces that tempted us. It does not dodge it, it faces God's just sentence of deserved wrath, and says it is right, it is true. But then, it argues, the price is fully paid. Fully paid! God's integrity has not been violated. He is free now to love us to the utmost degree. His justice has been upheld in the blood of his Son.

No one can ever argue that God takes a light view of sin when he sees the cross of Jesus. In all that bloody, gory episode, there is marvelous testimony to the whole world that God will never, ever put up with evil. But the cross argues for us, that there the price has been paid on our behalf. He who took our place paid the full price, and therefore we are free. God fully accepts me. There is nothing ever to hinder him in the least degree. I can look my guilt in the face and acknowledge it, admit the whole stinking mess, and point to the cross, and say, "That has fully taken care of it, and therefore there is no use talking about it anymore. The cross has settled it. I'm no longer what I once was because of that." And God treats me in that way.

Paul calls that "the riches of his grace." You see, God did it all. I didn't add to it, I did nothing to deserve it, or merit it in any way. God did it all. That is the riches of his grace. But you notice that

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he uses an additional phrase which is most significant. He says,

... according to the riches of his grace which he lavished upon us. {Eph 1:7b-8 RSV}

What does *lavished* mean? Well, when you lavish something upon someone you heap it on more and more. Lavished means repeated portions, again and again, and that is very important for us to realize. Paul is not talking here about the time he was forgiven, when he first became a Christian. In fact, the interesting thing is that the Scriptures never speak of us in that way. Redemption of believers in the New Testament is always a present occurrence, and it is exceedingly important to know this. I find that many Christians think that the time their sins were forgiven was when they were converted, when, for the first time, they laid hold of the grace and the forgiveness that is in Jesus Christ. Most of us tend to think that then God wiped out the past, and gave us a clean slate, and that from now on it is up to us to keep it clean. He gave us a new start once. Now we are to struggle to keep things straight. I tell you that, if that is the case, I'm hopelessly lost, and so are you, because I haven't been able to keep it clean since then. Have you?

No, Scripture never talks in those terms, never speaks of our redemption in that way. There is an existential note here. This is something which is constantly being repeated, eternally present, it occurs again and again. Whenever guilt strikes me, whenever I discover that I have lied to myself, as I do, deceived myself, told myself at one level that I was doing the right thing, while, at another level, I was giving way to what I knew to be wrong, and loving it – whenever that happens, I must acknowledge it, and face up to it again. That is so essential! And immediately that accomplishment of Christ is available, has already availed for me, and I step once again into a full sense of the acceptance of God my Father.

Now, God has never ceased accepting me at any time. His forgiveness was always present. It is my ability to receive it which hangs upon my willingness to face the facts, and acknowledge them. But the moment I do, I experience anew, afresh, again, the sense of liberation. And I tell you, I need forgiveness daily, and daily I have it. I

experience daily the joy of being set free, restored to usefulness.

Do you know what that means? It means, first, that God accepts me. He accepts me just exactly the way I've been living and the way I am right now. There is no quibble about it, no second-class citizenship involved; he fully accepts me. I am his son, his beloved son in whom he is well pleased. That is who I am; that's my identity from now on. And because of that, I find I can accept myself.

There is the key. You see, the reason we feel haunted with guilt is that we have never accepted and forgiven ourselves. And if we haven't forgiven ourselves it is a sure sign that we have never really accepted God's forgiveness. But the moment I understand that God, who sees everything exactly the way it is, in utter, stark naked reality, says of me, "I am satisfied with you in the blood of Christ. You are accepted by me," then I have no right to say anything less about myself, and I can accept myself. And that means that I can also accept you. I can accept the fact that you, like me, are not perfect, and that you need forgiveness at times, and it becomes my privilege and joy to extend it to you, to say, "That's okay, I'm not going to hold it against you. I'm glad to forgive you because I've been forgiven."

There are some people who say "Well, this makes people exploit this gospel of grace. They tend to say, 'If that's the case then I'll go out and do anything I please, sin all I want, and God is going to forgive it.'" But Paul argues, in many of his letters, that if you can say that about the grace of God, then you've never experienced it!

If you really can say that you are just going to go out and exploit his grace, then you've never known what it means to be forgiven. Because if you truly believe, your reaction inevitably is, "What a tremendous thing that I'm free from this inner tension and self-hatred!"

There is no anguish, no agony like guilt. There is nothing that haunts us so, nothing that makes us so peevish, and miserable, and restless, and upset with others as this terrible sense that we are inadequate people, that we are not worth anything. And to feel that way means that we have not accepted ourselves on God's terms. But if you once sense that you are forgiven, healed, whole in God's sight, that all of your sin has been set aside, and that now you can accept yourself, and regard yourself as a wholesome, adequate person, worth a great deal,

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made in the image of God, then you want to sing and rejoice and dance and shout to the heavens that at last you've been set free – and you never want to go back and add to that load of guilt again.

When I was in Miami in January I attended a conference where a Methodist minister of Tampa, Florida, was speaking. At the close of his message he told us of an incident which had occurred the Sunday before, and I've never forgotten it. At the close of that service, which had been a wonderful communion service, he asked a Young Life worker to come up and dismiss the service in prayer. He knew that this young man had discovered just the week before that he had terminal cancer. When he came forward he brought his guitar with him. He stood on the steps of the platform, and said, "I'd like to give the benediction, but I want to sing it."

Before he sang he gave a brief word of testimony regarding his own life. He told of how he had been raised in the streets, had been kicked around, hadn't known any family life, had fallen early into drugs, had shot heroin for six years, and had destroyed most of the soundness of his body, and laid the foundation for the cancer that later came. He told of how he had sold his body to men to be used homosexually, had made his living that way, and of how miserable and wretched he was in that situation, trying desperately to find some sense of meaning and worth. Then someone told him about Jesus, and he told of how Jesus had freed him. He had become a Young Life worker in order to share the Word with high school kids. Then he said, "I want to sing this song now as the benediction." He struck a few chords on his guitar and very simply he began to sing that old Sunday school song:

I am so glad that our Father in heaven
Tells of His love in the Book He has given;
Wonderful things in the Bible I see
This is the dearest, that Jesus loves me.

Then he sang the other verses:

Though I forget Him and wander away,
Still He doth love me wherever I stray;
Back to His dear loving arms would I flee,
When I remember that Jesus loves me.

Oh, if there's only one song I can sing,
When in His beauty I see the great King,
This shall my song in eternity be:
"Oh, what a wonder that Jesus loves me!"

There wasn't a dry eye in the congregation when he finished, and there wasn't a dry eye in our conference when, at the close of it, Ted Smith slipped to the piano and softly began to play the notes of that song, and we sang it over to ourselves in our hearts. "Oh, what a wonder that Jesus loves me!" That is what gives us our sense of worth – our sins are forgiven, not just in the past, but momentarily, day by day. Never, ever will our sins separate us from the love of God which is in Jesus Christ our Lord!

Prayer:

Our Father, we pray that these words may come home to our hearts with reality, and that we will understand that only in those areas of our life where we have been forgiven do we have any standing in your sight, that if there are areas of our life where we think we've made it, where we're already satisfying to you, where we've never needed to be forgiven, where we've been adequate, Lord, those are the very areas in which we stand condemned and ought to be ashamed. Forgive us our self-righteous spirits which oftentimes try to stand upon a phony righteousness, as though we were good in ourselves. Help us to take our place with the saints of all the ages and say these words, "We've been redeemed by Jesus' precious blood, and only that has paid an adequate price." We ask in his name, Amen.

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The Mystery of Unity

by Ray C. Stedman

Today, in the first chapter of Ephesians, we will be examining a great question with which men continually wrestle in our day, as they have all through history: The question of whether or not there is a purpose in the universe. Do the events of history make any sense? Is the record of human events – with its concatenation of tragedy and happiness and misery and heartache and joy – to any real effect, is it moving toward any one goal?

Or is life, as Shakespeare had Hamlet describe it, “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing”? There are many people today who say that is a true description. They agree with Hamlet. There are many voices saying that there is no purpose for the universe, and they are respected voices. Many historians, scientists, and others, looking at life around us, at the human story, say that no plan is evident, no purpose discernible, through all the strange mixture of history.

I was reading the commentary on the Bible by William Barklay this week. He cites several English voices in this respect:

- Oscar Wilde, in one of his epigrams, said, “You give the criminal calendar of Europe to your children under the name of history.” That is all he could see in history, a criminal calendar.
- G. N. Clark, in his inaugural lecture as president of Cambridge University, said, “There is no secret and no plan in history to be discovered. I do not believe that any future consummation could make any sense of all the irrationalities of preceding ages. If it could not explain them, still less could it justify them.”
- And in the introduction to his *A History of Europe*, H. A. L. Fisher writes, “One intellectual excitement has been denied me. Men wiser and more learned than I have discovered in history a plot, a rhythm, a predetermined pattern. But these harmonies are concealed from me. I can see only one emergency following another, as wave follows upon wave, only one great fact with respect to which, since it is unique, there can be no generalization, only one safe rule for the historian – that he should recognize in the development of human destiny the play of the contingent and the unforeseen.”
- And Andre Maurois said, “The universe is indifferent. Who created it? Why are we here upon this puny mud heap, spinning in infinite space? I have not the slightest idea, and I am quite convinced that no one else has the least idea.”

Well, that is a common view in our day, but the Apostle Paul disagrees emphatically! We are examining his great statement in Chapter 1, from Verse 3 to Verse 14, in which he gathers up a tremendous array of facts which disprove that view. This statement cuts right across the thinking of the men in Paul’s day and of the leaders of thought in our day.

We have already investigated some of this. Remember that we found the answer to the search for personal meaning and identity in what Paul says about the work of the Father, i.e., as far as Christians are concerned, “he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world,” {cf, Eph 1:4}. What does it do for your sense of worth to remind yourself that that is true of you, if you believe in and

know Jesus Christ? You were chosen in him before the foundation of the world!

And further, when we learn that the Father “destined us to be his sons” {Eph 1:5 RSV}, fore-ordained it, brought it to pass in the course of events that we should be his children, members of his family, it gives us immediately a sense of identity. We know who we are, how we got here, to whom we belong. We are part of a family, God’s family.

Then last week we found, in the work of the Son, the answer to the problem of guilt and of self-hatred. “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace which he lavished upon us,” {Eph 1:7-8 RSV}. The forgiveness of our trespasses takes care of the question of personal guilt. The only place, the *only place*, that I know of in the world where the human conscience is satisfied is in the death of Jesus, because the cross justifies God. Without that act of justification there is no release to the conscience within us. Something within us will not buy forgiveness on any other terms. But when we understand the redemption purchased through his blood, then we are satisfied. We can accept it. We can forgive ourselves and forgive each other on that basis. Wonderful, practical wisdom flows from that verse!

Now we come to the problem of history, and from Verse 9 through Verse 12, in one vast and glorious statement, the apostle deals with the purpose of the universe:

For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In him, according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will, we who first hoped in Christ have been destined and appointed to live for the praise of his glory. {Eph 1:9-12 RSV}

That is another of the vast and complicated statements in which the apostle crams together truth which relates to one great, central theme – the purpose of God in what is happening today. It is here that we begin to understand the world around us and the course of history as it rolls on. In order

to understand it we must take this statement apart. I find four major divisions in it:

- There is, first, the secret itself, “the mystery of his will,” the hidden purpose of God. You notice that Paul describes it as a mystery. A mystery, as we have seen in previous messages, is a secret which only God understands, and which men desperately need to know, but about which they can never find out except through the disclosure of God. Mysteries are the answers to the great questions which continually throb in the human heart. But you never can find them by any ordinary human enterprise. No course of instruction, no curriculum of a university, no scientific investigation, will ever reveal these secrets. You cannot find them out in any other way; God must tell us the answers. This is the sort of mystery spoken of here.

You remember that, in First Corinthians 4, Paul reminds us that we Christians have been made stewards of the mysteries of God, dispensers of them. It is up to us to grasp them, understand them, and speak out about them. What is wrong in the world of our day is the fact that the church has not been speaking about the mysteries which belong to it, and, therefore, the world is in confusion and darkness. So it is up to us to tell these forth.

- The second division, a very important one, is the way by which the mystery of God’s will was made manifest. Paul brings this out in this passage.
- The third is the time in which it is to be fully manifested.
- And the fourth is the part which we will play in accomplishing it – our part in this tremendous procedure.

That is our course of study this morning.

1. First let’s look at **the great secret** which Paul sets before us, found in the latter part of Verse 10:

... to unite all things in him [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth. {Eph 1:10b RSV}

That is what God is doing in history. He is working to unite all things in Christ. But that is rather an amazing statement, because, when you look at history, it looks as if exactly the opposite is occurring, as if things are falling apart. Paul has an answer for that – we'll come to it in just a moment – but first he wants us to understand that this is the direction in which God is moving, this is what he is going to do. He is going to unite all things in him.

When Paul says “all things,” he means *all* things. In fact, he amplifies it: “things in heaven and things on earth.” That is, things in the invisible realm of reality, heaven, the forces which are at work in our lives right now, but which we can't see or taste or touch or feel, both evil and good, the evil principalities and powers struggling with the angels and the forces of good, all things in heaven, and all the visible forces on earth, the struggles between nations, the strife among individuals – all these shall cease and be united together, brought to a head, is the idea. The Greek word for unite means “to head up,” i.e., to relate to Christ as a body relates to its head. Then he will be the director, the supreme operator, of all things, both in heaven and on earth.

Remember how Paul puts that in his letter to the Philippians. The process first was one of disglorification. Our Lord emptied himself of the glory that was his when he was equal with God, took upon himself the form of a servant, and was born in the likeness of man. Then he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. “Therefore,” Paul writes, “God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father,” {Phil 2:9-11 RSV}. That is where God is moving. That is what he is here to do in this time and space continuum in which we live.

You and I know that it doesn't look that way, does it? Men are living in a divided world, and it is evident on every side. We are out of step with nature, divided from nature. Something has come between us and the animals – they hate us, fear us, run from us. We

destroy them, eliminate them gradually but steadily from the face of the earth. We pollute the rivers and darken the skies and build garbage heaps around us that we don't know what to do with. We know we are doing this, but we don't know how to stop it, because this is a divided world. Something is at work to keep us from being in harmony with the world of nature in which we live. We are at war among ourselves, with nation against nation, class against class. Struggle and strife and division are taking place on every side. Our newspapers are full of it, as you know. And each one of us is a walking civil war! Aren't we? We fight within ourselves. We want to do something good, but at the same time we want to do exactly the opposite. We want both to have our cake and to eat it too, and we struggle constantly in this way.

2. Now, the great thought which Paul drops on us in this passage is that Jesus has come to stop all that. He has come to heal that division, to end it, to heal the broken relationships, to end the strife, to still the bitter, angry, hateful words that men say to one another. He has already started. He has begun healing, binding up, bringing all the divisions to a close. He himself said, “He who is with me gathers; he who is against me scatters,” {cf, Matt 12:30, Luke 11:23}. He has come as a healing force into the world to mend all the damage and bind up all the broken hearts. Paul makes a point of that. He says that **the way** this great fact was made known to us is by the life of Jesus. As he puts it,

For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ ... {Eph 1:9 RSV}

It is very important to see that, because you will never understand the purpose unless you understand the way it was made known. There is something very remarkable hidden in this statement. You see, this is the way we can come to understand what is happening in the world of our day, the events of today. If you understand what this way is, and how it works,

you can make sense of the events which otherwise don't make sense at all.

This next week we will be observing the Republican convention in Miami Beach. How do you understand it, how does it fit in with what God is doing? "Well," you Democrats say, "of course, it doesn't!" – but it is necessary that you ask that question. How does the Vietnamese war fit in with what God is doing? You must never read your newspaper as unrelated to what God is doing. He is working in this world. Every event is brought about, and finds its meaning, because it fits into the plan that he has. So what part does it play? How do you understand it? Where does it fit? That is exactly what Paul is dealing with here – how to read your newspaper intelligently, how to see where these current events fit into the program and the working of God in the affairs of men.

This has been made known to us, he says, "in all wisdom and insight." These two words, *sophia* and *phronesis*, were well understood by the Greek world. *Sophia* was the passion of the philosophers. They loved to try to find the secrets of life and to seek after wisdom. *Phronesis* was the common-sense, practical application of these to the problems of life. So Paul says that this mystery of God's will came to us through wisdom and insight made known, or set forth, in Jesus Christ. There is your clue. It is in Christ that you see how this works.

If you think through the ministry of Jesus, you can see what he is getting at. The end results of the ministry of healing which Jesus came to do are visible in his works. This was why he did his miracles. There is that beautiful passage in Isaiah 35 where Isaiah predicts that God shall come to us. And what does he say will be the results? Why, the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped, the lame man shall leap like a deer, the tongue of the dumb shall sing for joy, and there will be healing manifest in nature on every side {cf, Isa 35:5-7}.

And that is what happened when Jesus came. He began to heal. He opened blind eyes and touched lame men and made them well. He mastered nature, stilled the storm, walked on water, changed water into wine. He mastered

these forces. He delivered the oppressed from the realm of Satan. He set men free, he liberated them, and healed the hurt of their life. This was just the visible demonstration that the end result of his work, which he began then, would finally and ultimately be seen everywhere. So you see it in his works.

Now listen carefully: The principles by which this healing would take place in men's spirits, as well as their bodies, are set forth in his words, in the words of Jesus. That is why it is so important to listen to the words of Jesus. The Gospel records of the messages and sermons of Jesus are so vitally important because there we have declared to us the radical approaches to life, the revolutionary principles, which will produce a new creation, and are producing it right in the midst of the destruction of the old. That is what is going on in life.

Have you ever really seriously listened to the words of Jesus? Take the Beatitudes, for instance:

- "Happy," Jesus said, "are the poor in spirit," {cf, Matt 5:3}. Do you ever feel that way? When you get poor, impoverished, in spirit, when you feel as if you have nothing left, feel that you have been drained dry and have no riches of spirit remaining to you at all – are you happy? Do you go around rejoicing and singing, "Oh, how great it is that I'm so poor in spirit!?" No. We say we're depressed, and oftentimes we react with bitterness. But listen! Jesus says that is a golden moment. "Blessed [happy] are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," {Matt 5:3 RSV}. At that point, at that place, you are in a position to receive riches from a different source and by a different process than you could get at any other place, any other point of your life. There you are able to take them, nowhere else.
- "Happy are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted," {cf, Matt 5:4}. Do you ever think of yourself that way? Are you happy when you're sad? It sounds almost contradictory, doesn't it? But Jesus said that you are happy when you are mourning. Why? Well, because then you

can learn about a source of comfort which is otherwise so incredible, so beyond human experience that no human being can give it to you. But you can have it at that point, and at no other place. “Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted,” {Matt 5:4 RSV}.

- “Happy are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth,” {cf, Matt 5:5}.

He goes on saying these radical, transforming things. And we listen to them and recite them and say that they are wonderful words, but we never take them seriously. Yet that is what Paul is talking about, these healing, unifying principles revealed in Christ which will transform lives.

Do you live by those principles? Or do you live by the world’s interpretation of them?

J. B. Phillips, in his book, *When God Was Man*, gives the usual parody of the Beatitudes:

Happy are the pushers, for they get on in the world.

Happy are the hard-boiled, for they never let life hurt them.

Happy are they who complain, for they get their own way in the end.

Which do you live by? Which do I live by?

Happy are the blasé, for they never worry over their sins.

Happy are the slave drivers, for they get results.

The entire world of business is built on that one, isn’t it?

Happy are the knowledgeable men of the world for they know their way around.

Happy are the trouble makers, for they make people take notice of them.

These are exactly contrary to the words of Jesus. Notice how Jesus, when he is dealing with his disciples, takes these men of the world, with

all their conventional approaches, and constantly, gently, and graciously corrects them:

When they are arguing which is the greatest among them, he sets a child in their midst and says, “Look, you’ll never be great until you learn to be like this child. When you stop trying to be great, when you quit your struggling and manipulating and, in simple, childlike facing of life, trust God, then you can be great. But you never will make it otherwise,” {cf, Matt 18:1-4}.

The mother of James and John comes to him and asks for positions of privilege and favor at his right and left hand for them when he comes into his glory. And Jesus says, “You don’t know what you’re asking. My kingdom isn’t run that way. No, that will be given by my Father to those for whom it is prepared.” And he goes on to tell what prepares us for it: “Unless you drink the cup that I drink of, and are baptized with the baptism with which I’m going to be baptized, you cannot understand or grasp or have that kind of position of privilege and favor,” {cf, Matt 20:20-23}. By that he means the cross and the resurrection – the cross, with its denial, its setting aside of all the old ways, the ways the world operates, and its affirming of a wholly new process, a wholly new way of life, resurrection life – that, he says, will bring you to readiness for it. Nothing else will.

In Jesus’ parables you have so many revelations of a new way of life. The principles by which the new creation is going to come into being are revealed. How many of you men who work have ever wrestled with the parable of the laborers in the vineyard? How many of you have ever tried to justify in your thinking Jesus’ words that it was right for the man who owned that vineyard to pay those laborers the same amount of money, no matter whether they had worked the whole day long or only for an hour? Have you ever struggled with that? Why, the A F of L would shut that vineyard down within ten minutes if they ever heard of anything like that! They would never accept that as a way of operating. And yet Jesus says that is right. The owner of the vineyard has the right to be gracious above measure to some whom he chooses, and not to others. That is right. But that confounds us, confuses us,

bewilders us, baffles us. We don't understand that kind of thinking.

But that is what Paul means when he says that this plan which is working out right now in life was set forth in Christ. In the wisdom and insight of the Scriptures, you will find it, and only there.

And yet there is a strange thing about that. When you read of the ministry of Jesus, you find that he himself announces that he came to be a peacemaker. He came to heal, to save, to deliver, to liberate. Yet he also said, "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's foes will be those of his own household," {cf, Matt 10:34-36}. The strange thing is that at the beginning he seems to make things worse rather than better. He increases the division and the strife. He offended the rulers when he spoke. His disciples said to him many times, "Lord, don't you realize that you offended those men?" {cf, Matt 15:12}. "What you said made them angry. You are never going to make it as king if you don't learn how to handle your public relations a little better!" He offended and baffled his own disciples. He hurt them at times by what he said to them. He sent people away instead of trying to get them to join his cause. And it all ended at last in the hurt and heartache and blood of the cross. But out of that hurt and destruction there came ultimate joy and blessing. That is what Paul is getting at here.

3. And that leads on to **the time** when all this is going to be fully manifest. He says it will be:

... a plan for the fullness of time [or, literally, "unto the administration of the completeness of the seasons"], {Eph 1:10a RSV}

The seasons that he mentions here are the cycles of history. Any historian will tell you that history moves in cycles. There are times of peace and prosperity which move at last into apathy and lethargy, and this foments disquiet and uncertainty and then finally rebellion and revolution which brings about a change which

results in peace and prosperity which, in turn, move into apathy and lethargy, etc. You can trace those cycles throughout history again and again and again. Those are what the Bible calls the seasons.

Paul says that there is a time coming when all these seasons, which have been working on incessantly toward a great goal, will be fulfilled – the completeness of the seasons. Someday they will be ended. And then we will know that God has succeeded in tearing down the old creation, destroying it utterly, and at the same time has built up the new.

Now here is a remarkable thought that Paul is conveying to us.

When I started this summer to build an addition to my home the first thing we had to do was to tear off part of the roof. (I helped by falling through the ceiling!) The roof had to be destroyed first, eliminated. We had to destroy the old before we could build the new.

But the marvel of God is that he does both at the same time, and by the same process! Do you grasp the implications of that? You see, the heartache, the hurt, the suffering, the injustice, the misery, is the way he is tearing down the old. But that same heartache and hurt and suffering is the way he is building the new. That is what the Scriptures tell us. That is the amazing revelation, the amazing thought of God which is dropped upon us. And that is why we have references all the way through Scripture to our part in this – the fact that we are called upon not only to believe in Christ and follow him, but also to suffer for his name's sake as part of the process. God is doing both at once. By means of the hate and the hurt and the suffering he is building the new creation. And when the old is destroyed, the new emerges, all finished, complete, and at the same time.

That is the administration of the fullness of time.

4. What is **our part**? Well, Paul has put it in one phrase:

... we who first hoped in Christ have been destined and appointed to live for the praise of his glory. {Eph 1:12 RSV}

That is our part.

But this translation softens it to a degree that we miss a bit of what is said. What Paul literally says is, “We have been made his inheritance.” We saints are the inheritance of Christ, his heritage. In Verse 18 of this same chapter Paul refers to “the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints.” It is necessary to understand what that means. There is a double inheritance in the Christian life. We inherit Jesus. He is our inheritance. He is our resource from which we draw. If you receive an inheritance you live on that basis. You use your inheritance to enrich yourself. And Jesus is our inheritance. We can enrich ourselves with him at any moment. He is our power, our strength, our love, our life, our wisdom, our truth. He is what we live by. Christ is our life.

But, and this is the wonderful thing, we are his inheritance. He draws on us. He takes us and uses us. He has prepared us. Our bodies and souls, our full humanity, are to be his to use to manifest the new creation in the midst of the destruction of the old. That is his inheritance in the saints. All that produces riches, not only in our life but in the lives of others, and in the world in general – the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints.

What does that mean in practical terms? Well, that means that you and I must not complain any longer about what life hands us. It is the Father who has made that choice. He has chosen to put us where we are, and to put us into the situations where we find ourselves, and to give us the problems that we have, in order that, in the hurt and the heartache and the suffering, and in the joy and the blessing and the riches, whatever they may be, the life of Jesus may be released in that situation. By that means he destroys the old and brings in the new. And as we make ourselves available to him moment by moment, in the shop, in the office, in the home, in the backyard, wherever we are, and as we respond with joy and love and acceptance to the situation in which we find ourselves, God is glorified. Christ receives his inheritance. He finds riches of delight and enjoyment in that. The old is torn down, and the new is built in its place, all in one great, tremendous operation.

I don't fully understand that, but I know it works. I know that is the way God is working. And therefore there is no escape from the heartache and hurt and suffering. It is going to be there for us. But it is an opportunity, never an obstacle!

Let me give you an illustration which perhaps will involve you as well as me. In my mail yesterday was a thick envelope from the City of Palo Alto. I opened it and found a letter enclosing a petition signed by one hundred fourteen people who live right near this church asking the city to revoke our use permit and to restrict our operations as a church. My first reaction was anger. Why should they do this? Why should they try to stop what is happening here, what God is doing among us? Why should this resistance and opposition arise? I was resentful and felt defensive immediately. Don't they know what's happening in terms of changed lives? Don't they understand that youths are being redirected, and older people revitalized, that homes are being blessed and marriages saved, that life is coming alive in new ways as never before to scores and hundreds of people?

But, of course, I immediately realized that they don't know that. Most of them, probably, have never been inside; they've been only outside. And they're upset. They are annoyed by people who park in such a way as to block their driveways. They are fed up with exhaust fumes because it takes so long for us to get out of our crowded parking lot. They have had enough of noise at night, and of lights that shine into their homes in the middle of the night, and a lot of other things which may seem small to us but which to them are irritations and aggravations.

And then I began to see what this is about. This is God's opportunity given to us to demonstrate a real, genuine, loving spirit of appreciation and thoughtfulness to our neighbors. This is his opportunity for us to say “I'm sorry for hurt that we've caused, unwittingly to be sure, but inconvenience and annoyance and irritation nevertheless,” and for us to respond not in defensiveness but in love, to curtail the annoyances as much as possible, to return good for evil, to invite them to come and see what is happening, and to welcome them to share with us the joys as well as the irritations of what goes on. And, if God grants it, we hope that

response will be received by our neighbors in a spirit of relief and acceptance.

I had said to myself, at first, “Why should this intervene? Why do we have to take time out to deal with these petty little problems?” But, of course, the answer is that these aren’t petty problems. They constitute a great opportunity, a glorious chance to know our neighbors, to break down barriers that we, unknowingly, have erected. It is a chance for the whole congregation to show some love and understanding, and to be extra careful not to annoy those around us, and to apologize when we have, and to renew relationships with these people whom God loves. That is why God sent it.

And, in the process, he will bring in the new, and break down the old.

Prayer:

Our heavenly Father, we are grateful that these great concepts we read about in your

word are not mere words meant to delight our intellect; they are meant to guide our lives, to change us, to make us different people. We pray that they will. We pray that what we have learned here about our part in your program – that we are to be available instruments for you to work out your purpose right where we are – may help us then to see what look like obstacles and difficulties to be those very opportunities sent our way. And may we realize that you are with us, that you intend to bring it out right, that you will supply the power and strength we need to do it, and that it is all available in Jesus Christ. Help us then to rejoice, Lord, to lift up our heads and be glad, because as we see the old collapsing it is to remind us of the certainty that the new is arising, and that your purpose is being fulfilled. We pray in Jesus’ name, Amen.

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The Word and the Spirit

by Ray C. Stedman

As we return to Ephesians this morning, we are still occupied with the great summary of this letter which Paul gives us in Verses 3 through 14 of Chapter 1. This is one unbroken sentence in the original language, gathering up in one vast statement all the tremendous themes of this letter to which Paul will return again and again. This is the way with these apostolic letters. They usually begin with a summary and then are broken down into detail, enabling us to focus very carefully upon the truth presented, to see it in its broad sweep and then to come back and work our way through it, and thus to grasp it and understand it.

It is so important that we understand what God is doing! The theme of this whole passage is that God is at work. And it is important that we understand that the universe runs according to the laws of God, not according to the laws of men. Our legislatures enact laws, statesmen negotiate treaties, and we have all the machinery of government to carry them out – and it is right that this should be. But the one factor which is fundamental, which man cannot change, which always keeps on operating exactly as it was intended, is these basic laws of the universe which God has set into being. Therefore, it is absolutely essential that we find out what God is doing today, and how we all relate to that, where we fit into the scheme of God's activity.

In this passage we have seen the threefold God at work:

The Father, before the foundation of the world, chose us, called us – those of us who have come to know Jesus Christ as Lord – to be part of his family. What a tremendous theme that is! Before the world was made we were in the mind and heart of God, and he called us and destined us to be his sons. We never would have come to him apart from that. Jesus said, "No man can come unto me except my Father draw him," {cf, John 6:44}. What a fascinating concept that is to remember – to

remind yourself that God has thought of you, has called you, has drawn you, has appealed to your will, and has made you to be part of his family.

Then we have seen how the Son has liberated us in his death. We have received the forgiveness of our sins – not once, not merely at the beginning of our Christian experience, but again and again and again. Day by day, we are experiencing the forgiveness of our failures so that we live without condemnation, without a sense of guilt, accepted by God. And we are constantly acknowledging those failures, bringing them to him, and then going on from there forgiven. Thus, as Paul has put it, he has lavished his grace upon us again and again. And then, in resurrection, the Son of God is at work to break down the barriers in our own hearts and lives, and the divisions between one another, and to heal the hurts and the estrangements of the human family, to break these down and eliminate them until at last, as the Scriptures predict, there will come the manifestation of the new creation when all things shall head up into one in Jesus Christ our Lord. Nothing which is not a part of that is worth a snap of your finger. Everything else is going to crumble to dust. What God is doing is the only thing that will last, and the part which we have in that is the only part of our life which is worthwhile.

Now we come to the work of the Holy Spirit. Paul states this so clearly for us in Verses 13 and 14:

In him [Christ] you also, who have heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and have believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, which is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory. {Eph 1:13-14 RSV}

Notice two things which are emphasized here which are always found together in Scripture – the Word, and the Spirit. Both are absolutely essential. There is no salvation without both of these. These are the instruments by which God performs his work.

It is always a mistake to emphasize one of these to the exclusion of the other. There are groups today who are doing this:

- Some say, “No, we don’t need the Word. All we need is the Spirit’s guidance within. All we need is simply to trust the feelings we have. God the Spirit is dwelling in us and he will lead us.” But whenever a group does that, they follow the pattern of similar groups in the past, and it invariably results in impractical ideas, in mysticism, in fanaticism, in rigid, hard-eyed determinism, and in individualism – everybody going his own way and doing his own thing. Utter confusion results if you set aside the Word and try to follow only the Spirit.
- On the other hand there are those who try to follow the Word alone. On my recent trip around the country I visited several churches in which it was evident that they had lost all the freshness and vitality of the Spirit and had been reduced to mechanical, orthodox, perfunctory performance of the Word. They were orthodox to the core, but there was no life. They were sterile and dull and lifeless. This is what results when you try to adhere to the Word without the Spirit. It results in dry, mechanical services which only go through a certain form, a ritual observance, and the people go home deadened and dried up. It results in a kind of clenched-teeth piety in which the people resolve that they are going to “do their duty” as Christians, but there is no motivation, no hunger, no satisfaction, no love, no warmth, no joy, no life.

But in Scripture you always find the two together. The Word is interpreted by the Spirit, and the Word becomes fresh and vital as you look to the Holy Spirit to make Jesus Christ step out of the pages and stand in your presence in living flesh. You feel the heartbeat of the human Lord who walked here on earth. It is the job of the Spirit to do that, and you never should come to the Bible

without asking him to take these words and make them come alive.

Remember how Jesus, on the road to Emmaus, appeared to his two disciples and he took the Scriptures, the account says, and beginning with Moses and the prophets he expounded to them all the things there concerning himself. As they reported the experience later they said, “Did not our hearts burn within us,” {cf, Luke 24:27-32}. That burning of heart as you read the Word is the work of the Spirit of God, taking the Word and making it alive and vital.

But on the other hand the Spirit is identified by the Word. There are many spirits abroad today, many voices talking to us, many sources from which we are getting information and ideas and attitudes thrown at us and approaches to the solution of problems proposed. How do you know which is right? How do you know that it is not the voice of the enemy cleverly concealed, seeming as if it is the voice of God, sounding as if it is going to offer you blessing? How can you tell? Only by the Word. It is the Word that identifies the Holy Spirit. And all false spirits are detected by this Word. So we must have together the Word and the Spirit for balance and sanity in our Christian lives.

As you look at this passage you can notice three things that the apostle says are normative for Christians. Every Christian who reads this letter can expect to have in his own experience these three things which are fundamental to his Christian faith:

- First, you “have heard the word of truth,”
- Second, you “have believed in him [Christ],” and
- Third, you “were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit.”

Those three are essential experiences if you have come to know Jesus Christ.

1. Now let’s look at them together in more detail. Paul says,

you ... have heard the word of truth.
{Eph 1:13b RSV}

The world in which Paul lived and wrote was a world like ours today – filled with all kinds of twisted, distorted ideas, with attitudes which are wrong, with approaches and philosophies which are absolutely flawed and will lead people astray. But people had believed them, as they believe them today. There are many delusions and illusions abroad. We are brought up with our minds cluttered with all sorts of erroneous ideas. How are we ever supposed to keep them straight? Well, the great thing about the gospel is that when you hear this glorious message about Jesus Christ – who he was, the kind of a world into which he came, the reason why he came, what he did when he came – you discover that you are listening for the first time to pure, unadulterated truth.

The gospel is regarded by the world in many ways:

- Some people think of it as one remedy, for certain ills, among many possible choices.
- Some think of it as wishful thinking on the part of the weak and insecure who need something to bolster their morale.
- Others feel that it is all an illusion or a pipe dream. The Communists will tell you that. They say that the gospel is merely the opiate of the people, that it is fantasy, not real. But the exact opposite is true.

The gospel is a return to reality. It is the end of illusion. It is the tearing away of all these mistaken concepts and ideas and the veils of illusion, and it is a return to stark, naked, unadorned fact. The great thing about the gospel is that it puts you back in touch with reality. You begin once again to see things the way they really exist.

For instance, only the gospel describes the true condition of men. Have you ever noticed how easy it is to think about yourself as though there is really nothing very seriously wrong? We all tend to minimize our problems. We think that all we need is to clear up a few areas which are slightly discolored – nothing very serious – just to get rid of a couple of bad hab-

its or to add a bit more morality or to make a stronger effort toward brotherhood or toward more sincerity and courtesy, and then we can solve our problems as human beings. We can live together peaceably. We can work out our family struggles and our other relationships. Most people think that way. There is something inherent in us which makes us think that ours is not a very serious problem. But the gospel tells us that is all wrong. The truth is that we are all murderers at heart. There isn't one of us, if given sufficient motive or an overwhelming period of stress, and under the proper conditions, who would hesitate the slightest second to take another human life. We are murderers at heart! And so deep-seated is this problem that there is nothing we can do about it for ourselves. We cannot cure ourselves. We cannot save ourselves.

Some time ago I culled a quotation from a speech by Winston Churchill, who was a wise man. He was acquainted with the history of humanity. He was himself a history-maker involved in some of the great, sweeping movements of contemporary experience. This is what he said:

“Certain it is that, while men are gathering knowledge and power with ever increasing speed, their virtues and their wisdom have not shown any notable improvement as the centuries have rolled. Under sufficient stress – starvation, terror, war – like passion, or even cold intellectual frenzy – the modern man we know so well will do the most terrible deeds, and his modern woman will back him up!”

That is Churchill's analysis of human life.

And that is what the gospel says. It tells us why we constantly experience frustration in our life, why we can't make things go together right. It is because we are experiencing what Scripture calls “the wrath of God.” *Wrath* means “the removal of restraint.” God has taken the bounds off human evil and has allowed it to run its course, to have its head, and, consequently, we are constantly undercut and sabotaged, and something goes wrong with all our plans for working things out, a monkey wrench is always in the machinery. This is

why we experience bondage. We can't seem to make ourselves do what we want to do, the right thing to do. But the gospel tells us why.

And it declares God's love for us. It says that he hasn't forgotten us. It says that he has entered human life to share in its sorrow and its pain and, more than that, he went out and personally bore the penalty for our evil in deep, dark, awful mystery – far beyond our imagining and our reasoning – in order that we might have the reality of pardon and deliverance and liberty and freedom as children of God. All that is in the gospel. That is why it is called “the word of truth.” And what good news it is – the gospel of salvation!

2. The second thing the apostle says is: Not only have you heard the word of truth, and learned the facts about life, but, further,

you ... have believed in him. {Eph 1:13c RSV}

He stresses this, and I would like to stress it too. It is obvious that not only must we hear the word of truth, but we must act on it. We must believe it. And to believe it means to accept it as truth, and to act accordingly. You have never believed unless something is changed in your experience. If you say that you hold something to be true, but you go on living in exactly the same way, then you haven't really believed it. You are only kidding yourself. Belief results in change, in an adjustment to the facts, in conformity to reality. It means that you do something, you take the proper steps in relationship to that which has been revealed to you and which you now see to be true.

But will you notice that it is not belief *in it*; it is belief *in him* that Paul specifies. We are not to believe in the gospel; we are to believe in the Lord Jesus. It is more than admitting the intellectual truth of the plan of salvation which is required. Many people today feel that if you explain the plan of salvation to somebody and he says, “I believe it,” he has become a Christian. That is not so. You can believe the plan of salvation and even write theological treatises on it without ever being changed. That is not what changes you. The gospel is not the Sav-

ior, it is the Lord Jesus. He saves, and he alone. So faith, for a Christian, is always related to a Person, and it involves a personal commitment, a personal relationship. It is never merely an intellectual process nor a belief in a statement of fact.

Have you noticed that the apostles never let us forget this? In the first fourteen verses of this very chapter, the Apostle Paul mentions the Lord Jesus Christ fifteen times. He is constantly bringing him before us because God wants to drive home to our hearts this great fact. There is no way that you can have blessing from God apart from a continuing personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. We must learn not to believe these people who claim that they are going “directly” to God, because they are only deceiving themselves. It all comes through Christ and by means of a relationship to him.

A few weeks ago when I was on the east coast, I spoke at a Bible conference. Afterward a dear old Chinese-American lady came up to me and asked for an appointment later that day. She insisted upon talking privately, and so we got together and she told me her story. She was a medical doctor, had been practicing in that area for more than forty years, and had gained great respect. And for forty years she had been attending a certain denominational church. She had tried to discover the truth of Christianity, had joined the church, and was a regular member. But she said that her life was so appallingly empty and that she was constantly filled with anxiety and fear and a tremendous sense of purposelessness. Finally, in the last year or so, she had resorted to taking Demerol shots in order to quiet her nerves. But this only increased her anxiety and guilt and heaped it up. And now she was almost on the verge of a breakdown. She said that she had gone to her pastor and had told him the problem. But after listening to her he had sent her home, saying, “You are just feeling sorry for yourself. That's all.” As we talked it became apparent to me that in all these years of earnest searching she had never come to a personal knowledge of the Lord Jesus, had never related to him. And so I explained to her very simply the invitation that he offers: “Behold I stand at the door and knock. If any-

one hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him.” I asked her to respond to that invitation. Very quietly, without another word from me, she bowed her head and began, almost inaudibly, to pray. I could catch only phrases. She was telling the Lord how empty her life was, how lonely and despairing she had been, how guilty she felt about the drug shots she was taking to alleviate her agony. And she simply responded to Jesus’ promise and asked him to come into her life and to fulfill her life. When she finished, I prayed briefly. Then she looked up at me and said, “Oh, thank you so much!” She took my hand and held it, and said, “I just can’t tell you how much this means to me. Already things are different!” After I had explained a bit more of what the Lord would do for her she turned to me and, with her face just radiant, said, “You know, for the first time in years, my stomachache is gone!” Well, that is what it is all about. It is a personal relationship. It is believing in him – not in it, but in him.

3. The third thing that the apostle brings before us here is the strange phrase,

sealed with the promised Holy Spirit.
{Eph 1:13d RSV}

What does it mean to be sealed with the Spirit? Undoubtedly this is a reference to the ancient practice of sealing letters or other objects with sealing wax and impressing the wax with a seal worn on a ring and bearing an identifying image. The use of the seal always involved two specific ideas:

- The first was ownership: It marked to whom the letter belonged. It was possessed by the individual who owned the seal. This is what Paul is saying here. When God sent the Holy Spirit into your life, it was the mark that you belong to him. “You are not your own; you are bought with a price,” {1 Cor 6:19b-20a RSV}. The presence of the Spirit is your witness that you belong to him. As Paul says in Romans 8, “The Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God,” {cf, Rom 8:16 RSV}. And fur-

thermore, the joy and the peace and the love which he gives to you are a witness to others. As that joy and love and peace begin to flow out through you and overflow into the lives of others and begin to shine forth in love when you don’t feel like loving, in joy when your circumstances are unhappy, in peace when everything around you is troubled, it is a witness, an unmistakable mark to the world around, that you belong to God. There is something about you that is different. You have the mark of his ownership upon you.

- The second idea involved in the use of the seal was that of preservation. You remember that the tomb of Jesus was sealed with the seal of the Roman Emperor. That seal was intended to keep the tomb inviolate. No one dared break the seal of the emperor upon pain of death. Thus it was to preserve the tomb intact, without intrusion or destruction. This is the idea of the Spirit’s presence in our life. It means that God is going to keep us, that, as Paul puts it here, he guarantees our inheritance, that something more is to come and it is the Spirit himself who is the guarantee. In Greek, the word for “guarantee” is *arrhabon* and it means “a down payment.” We are familiar with that in these days of universal credit. You sign a paper and pay a down payment and that is the *arrhabon*, the guarantee that there is more to come. The presence of the Spirit in your life – the joy and the peace that he gives – is the guarantee that there is more yet to come, much more, much better, in fuller quantity, in greater quality even, than what you have experienced so far. Just as the satisfied smile on your banker’s face when you pay the down payment and sign the paper means that he knows there is more to come, so the presence of the Spirit in your life is an indication that there is far more yet to come – great and glorious as this is, it is not the end.

But here we need slightly to correct the translation in the Revised Standard Version. It isn’t really “... which is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it.” The original language is,

literally, "... until the redemption of the walk-around." This is a reference to the custom of buying a piece of ground and then going out and walking around it. When you walked around it, you made it yours. That was the sign to everybody else that you had paid the down payment and that this was now your piece of property.

That is what Paul says that God has done with us. It is not we who are acquiring possession; it is God. It is he who has walked around us, has marked us out, and given us the down payment, the earnest, the *arrhabon*, that he is going to come again and claim his purchased possession. That possession is our body. So Paul is referring here to the resurrection of the body, and in that day, he says, God completes the transaction. He comes to claim the whole thing, all for himself. What he has begun, he will accomplish. And the guarantee is the presence of the Spirit in your life and mine.

It is interesting that, in modern Greek, this term *arrhabon* is used for an engagement ring. When a boy gives a girl an engagement ring, he is giving her a guarantee that one day she is going to be his bride.

Last night many of us attended the wedding of Jack and Jody Crabtree. What a beautiful ceremony it was! There was a time when Jack gave Jody an engagement ring, an *arrhabon*, and this was the sign to her that, though he was going to be gone this past summer, she could depend upon the fact that he was coming back in the fall to claim her as his bride. And last night it happened – we were here and saw it. It was a most interesting service because many of the vows, which normally are couched in a sort of "King James" English, were brought up to contemporary language. So if you were here you remember that Jack promised Jody two things. He said, first, "I will not split," and second, "I will not cop out on my responsibilities."

I was interested by that because that is exactly what the coming of the Holy Spirit means in our life. He is saying to us, by his presence in us, "Don't worry, I will never split." If you want it in "King

James" English refer to Hebrews 13: "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee," {Heb 13:5 KJV}. But if you want it in contemporary terms this is exactly what the Holy Spirit is saying: "I will never split, and furthermore, I will never cop out on my responsibilities to you. I will complete what I have begun. I will finish what I have started." And this is the sign of the Spirit in our lives, the guarantee of our inheritance, as God has sent the Holy Spirit into our lives for that very purpose.

All this is in fulfillment of a promise once made to Abraham. Paul calls this the "promised" Holy Spirit. And 4,000 years ago, 2,000 years before Paul's day, God had said to Abraham, "I will bless you, and make you a blessing, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed through you," {cf, Gen 22:17-18}. That was the promise that God made. It meant that those who exercised the faith of Abraham would receive the Holy Spirit. That is the way you receive the Holy Spirit – by faith. If you want to see that, just turn to the previous book, Galatians. In Chapter 3, the apostle makes it very clear. He says, beginning in Verse 6,

Thus Abraham "believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." So you see that it is men of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith [not just the Jews, all the nations of earth], preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In thee shall all the nations be blessed." {Gal 3:6-8 RSV}

Then look at Verses 13-14: In the course of time ...

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us – for it is written, "Cursed be every one who hangs on a tree" – that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles, [what blessing?] that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. {Gal 3:13-14 RSV}

Now that is how you receive the Holy Spirit. It isn't by pleading. It isn't by waiting upon God and expecting a second experience after salvation. It is impossible to have salvation apart from the indwelling Spirit. And that Spirit is received by faith in the Lord Jesus. The minute you believe in him, the minute you commit yourself to him in response to his invitation and he enters your life, in that very moment you are indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit himself is God's seal. He marks you out, he identifies you as his, he guarantees you that he will perform every word that he has promised – until you stand in his presence absolutely overwhelmed by all that God has done for you, so completely caught up by the marvelous fulfillment of every word of God's promise that you are almost speechless – but not quite, because you notice how this passage ends: "... to the praise of his glory."

This is the third time that Paul has used this phrase in the passage. Each of the members of the Godhead – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – accomplishes his work so perfectly that it always ends up "... to the praise of his glory." The end result is that every one of us, standing at last in God's presence, has a heart filled with praise. And it begins now, as the Spirit does his work within us, to the praise of his glory, so that we can't help but sing and glorify God for all that he has done.

This is what the apostle wants us to learn. This is where you get your identity. As a Christian you ought to remind yourself every morning that this is true of you. This is where you can find yourself. This is where you gain a sense of acceptance of yourself, and it is where you gain the power and the resources to cope with the problems that come to you through the day.

This is why the apostle sets these facts out so plainly. It is because they are of practical help in handling the difficulties, the pressures, the prob-

lems, the stresses, the uncertainties, and the disappointments that life throws at you.

Do you ever wake in the morning and say to yourself, "I am a child of God. I have been forgiven of my sins. I am accepted in God's family. He has marked me out as his own. He has put his Spirit within me, releasing to me the full life of the Lord Jesus Christ. Every power that Jesus himself had to perform his life upon earth, I have in him. Therefore I am equipped to handle whatever comes today. I can take whatever life throws at me because I have him and all the fullness of his life."

That is where you find identity. There is no other ground.

That is what enables you to handle whatever may come in your life.

Let us praise his glory.

Prayer:

Our Heavenly Father, how much we thank you for this revelation of truth. This is the way life really is. This is the way you see things, and what you see is reality. And Lord, we pray that we may see it not just at this moment but repeatedly, again and again, and that we may not look at ourselves as we so frequently do – as being worthless, useless, and compelled to do evil. You have freed us, Lord Jesus. You have forgiven us. You have liberated us to live for the praise of your glory. Lord, help us to do that in this very moment. Help us to understand that these are facts and to reckon upon them, and tomorrow to reckon upon them again, and the next day, and all through this week. And help us to rejoice in the undergirding fact of our life that we have this relationship to you. We ask you to do this so that we might grow strong in the Spirit's strength, by the power of this Word, in Jesus' name, Amen.

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Turned On by Prayer

by Ray C. Stedman

With Verse 15 of Ephesians 1 we leave the great doctrinal passage in which the Apostle Paul has been teaching the great facts underlying the Christian faith, and we turn now to his prayer. This study will be a helpful revelation of the place of prayer in the Christian experience, especially in believers who are maturing, and in relationship to the study of Scripture. This brings prayer and the Scriptures together. The apostle, having finished the great passage in which he has set forth what the three-fold God is doing for us, now adds these words addressed to the Ephesian Christians:

For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, ... {Eph 1:15-18a RSV}

We will stop there and finish the rest of the passage next Sunday.

I want to call your attention to the reason why the apostle prayed for these Christians. He starts with those very words: "For this reason," and then he goes on to list the evidence which makes him confident that they are Christians. The phrase, "For this reason," looks back upon the great passage that we have just covered, from Verse 3 through Verse 14, in which the apostle has been outlining for us the great, fundamental facts about our faith:

1. Our call by the Father,
2. His destining us to be his sons,

3. The redemption and forgiveness available to us in the Son,
4. The opening of our eyes to the whole plan of God,
5. Our sealing by the Spirit,
6. Our enlightening by the Spirit in our lives and hearts, and
7. His guarantee that we shall inherit all that God has provided for us.

It is for this reason, Paul says, that he prays for the saints at Ephesus and others who read this letter. It is because they need to understand these truths.

He is convinced that they are Christians because of two things which have come to his attention – their faith, and their love. That is most instructive. The apostle evidently has heard in Rome of the faith of these Christians, many of whom were in cities around Ephesus and whom he had never met. He has heard of the fact that they have confessed Christ and turned from their pagan idols. They have acknowledged that Jesus Christ is Lord, and have taken open positions as Christians. But the thing which convinced him that their faith was true was the evidence of their love – faith that works by love. It was the fact that love was beginning to be shown among them, love for all the saints, which made him aware of the fact that the faith they exercised was genuine.

That is very helpful to know, because, if your faith has not resulted in your becoming a more loving person, in your growing in this direction, then it is not genuine faith. It is merely an intellectual acceptance, which means nothing. Remember

how James stresses this very fact. He says that faith is revealed by the concern that it awakens for the hungry, the homeless, the needy, and the heart-broken, and our willingness to reach out to heal the hurts of those in society around us. He said, in effect, “Show me your love, and I’ll see your faith; but don’t talk to me about faith unless love is present,” {cf, Jas 2:18}. And Paul agrees. He has heard of their love, and so he is aware that their faith is genuine.

And notice that it is love toward all the saints, not just toward some of them. Some saints are easy to love. Some are beautiful people, joyful and happy, and everybody likes to be around them. But Paul is struck by the fact that these Christians love all the saints, and, therefore, their love is not based upon people’s personalities, their friendliness, nor upon their wealth; rather, it is based upon the fact that they are saints, they belong to the Lord Jesus, they are in the family of God. This is what every family must learn. If you want harmony in your home, you must learn to love your brothers and sisters. They may not be always the most pleasant people, but they are your brother, your sister. This is what the apostle is struck by among the Christians in Ephesus.

Today, too, one of the most remarkable signs that a person has genuine faith is that he loves anyone who loves the Lord Jesus. It doesn’t make any difference what the person might be like. I have just returned from a large middle-American city where I was involved in several churches, and I was struck by the fact that oftentimes it is so difficult to get Christians to begin really to love one another. They resist opening up to each other and bearing one another’s burdens. They have been taught and trained, somehow, to live in isolation from each other, and not to want to get involved with anyone else. (That is the way the world lives today.) But this is always a mark of the fact that their faith has diminished. Because if your faith in Jesus Christ is genuine it always results in love.

Those two qualities, then, have convinced the Apostle Paul that these Christians are real. Therefore they need to know and grasp the great truths he has outlined for them, and it is for this reason that he prays. Now, I want you to notice that. This indicates that the command of truth, the knowledge of doctrine, is never enough to enable one to grow up as a Christian. You can learn all that there is in the Bible, and be able to write a very

profound and scholarly theological treatise on it, but if it hasn’t reached the heart it is absolutely worthless. Truth known never changes anybody; it is truth done, truth which has flowed through the emotions and gripped them and thus motivated the will.

Thus this passage beautifully takes into consideration the way God has made us. He has made us so that truth hits the mind first of all. And that is where it should strike. We ought to be exposed to the facts, as Paul has exposed us here, but that is never enough. There are some people today who think that if you merely study your Bible and take the right courses and learn all these great facts, learn the doctrine, the truth of the Scriptures, that is all you need. But the apostle makes very clear here, that is never enough. Just that much will never change anybody. But that truth must somehow move from the head down to the heart. It must grip “the eyes of the heart,” to use the beautiful figure that Paul employs, and there must be a moving of the emotions so that the whole man gets involved, and, thus, the will is properly motivated. He is talking about motivation. And this wise apostle knew that nobody ever gets motivated by truth alone. Truth can be dull and academic and deadly. Your heart also must be stirred. So he prays for that.

It is instructive to see that prayer is what will do that. I must confess that I have been greatly moved by this passage because it has made me aware that we must add, deliberately and intelligently, this dimension to our teaching. Teaching truth is never enough. We can teach another person – a student in the Sunday school or our own children at home – and they are able to parrot the truth back to us, and oftentimes we are satisfied by that. We say that they know this truth. But the apostle was not satisfied. He knew that you don’t know truth in that way. You never know it until it has gripped you, and you have been changed by it. So that is what he prays for. God has designed life that way.

Next, notice the one to whom he prays. He uses two unusual names for God: “the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory.” Why does he call him that? Of course God is “the God of our Lord Jesus Christ” when Jesus was here as a man. Yet there is no recognition, here, of the fact that the Son is equal with the Father. Paul is not praying directly to Christ; he is praying to the God of the

Lord Jesus. That is amazing when you think about it. Why does he do so? Well, the reason is that the evidence we have that God will answer this kind of prayer is that he is the One to whom the Lord Jesus prayed. He is the One upon whom Jesus depended for the enlightenment of his own disciples. For he, too, could not merely teach them and thus deliver them from evil. He had to pray for them in order that the truth might grip their hearts and they might be changed by the truth that they knew. That is why you often find our Lord praying for his disciples, why he spent whole nights on a mountainside, at times, praying truth into his disciples' hearts.

Do you remember when Peter came to him with his confidence, his strutting boldness, and told him, "Lord, don't worry about me, I'll never leave you. These other rascals will defect and run away, but you can count on me, Lord. I'll stick with you." Do you remember the Lord's answer to that? "Peter, Satan has desired to have you, that he might sift you like wheat [that he might run you through a sifter so all the phoniness will be made visible]," {cf, Luke 22:31}. And Jesus implied by that, "I'm going to give you to him, I'll let him have you." Yet he went on to say, "but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail." It was that prayer which held Peter together when, three times in one night, he denied his Lord. Finally, gripped by the awfulness of what he had done, he went out and wept bitterly in the streets of Jerusalem. But something held him steady – it was the prayer of the Lord Jesus, the light which came from that prayer, which gripped his heart and held him on course. And so the very God to whom Jesus himself prayed, and upon whom he depended to keep his disciples in the truth that they were learning, is the same God to whom we are to pray, that the Father of glory may open our hearts and lives.

I love that phrase: "the Father of glory." There is a lot of hope in that! Do you know what that means? It could mean, of course, "the glorious Father, the Father who is himself glorious." And God is glorious. But I think that here it means instead "the One who originates glory, the One who begets glory, the Father who produces it."

I attended a wedding reception some time ago, and what a glorious occasion it was! Everyone was joyful and happy, rejoicing with the young couple. And it was in a beautiful setting. There was a scrumptious spread of food, and the decorations made it a lovely place. I circulated around, and off

in the corner I found a man standing by himself. I talked with him and discovered that he was the father of the bride. He had been paying all the bills, and, as father of the bride, he was the father of glory. He had produced all the glory of this occasion.

And this is the idea conveyed by that title "the Father of glory." When you pray to God about understanding truth you are asking him to make this truth glorious, to make it come alive, to make it vivid, living, vital. That is what he promises and is able to do. He is the Father of glory. That is why Paul uses that title here. The God to whom Jesus prayed is also the Father of glory, is able to produce glory.

Paul turns now and prays for these Christians. Notice what he prays for: "... [that he] may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, ..." Why does he say that? Aren't these Christians? Haven't they already been indwelt by the Holy Spirit? Yes. Paul has already acknowledged that. He has said that they were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise. So he is not praying that they will be given the Holy Spirit. He is praying for a special ministry of the Holy Spirit. In the book of Isaiah, the prophet speaks of the seven spirits of God – the spirit of wisdom, the spirit of understanding, the spirit of counsel, the spirit of knowledge, etc. He doesn't mean that there are seven Holy Spirits; he means that there is one Holy Spirit who has a seven-fold ministry of illuminating and enlightening the heart. That is what Paul is praying for here.

Notice that he doesn't take it for granted that this is going to happen. This is not an automatic feature of the Christian life. If you want the Scriptures, the Word of God, the truth, to come alive to you, you must ask for illumination. That is what this passage teaches us. And if you want it to come alive to someone else you must ask that they be given the spirit of wisdom and of revelation. Remember that James says, "You have not, because you ask not," {cf, Jas 4:2}. Everything that God has is for us, but it won't be given automatically.

Any wise father knows that you can't give to your children in that way. If you were to anticipate all your children's wishes and were always to have whatever they need ready for them even before they become aware that they needed it, they would soon take it all for granted. They would fail to develop a

thankful spirit. They would fail to develop any sense of need in their lives. No wise parent does that. You learn to wait until your children sense some need, until they come and ask you for help, or until they realize that they are up against it and that there is no other way it can be provided. Then is the time to step in.

And God does that. He is teaching and training us, and he never allows the Scriptures to come alive for us without our sensing a need for this.

That is why for so many, probably for all of us, there comes a time when the Bible becomes dull. You read it and it doesn't say anything – there is no illumination; or you are listening to a message and it falls flat – other people seem to be blessed, but you get nothing out of it. What is the reason? Well, it is part of the great conflict which Paul speaks of in the last chapter of this letter – the blinding, hardening, darkening work of the powers of darkness which keeps us from grasping the truth. To counteract that, there must be the ministry of prayer, of asking God for a spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that the truth may come alive with vitality.

That is what Paul is asking for here.

I wonder sometimes if much of our teaching doesn't fall flat and much of the training of our children isn't a failure because we have never prayed this for them. Notice how the apostle does, how he is so concerned that these mighty truths should be more than mere sentences on the page, that they will really grip the lives and hearts of these Christians. And notice also that it is wisdom and revelation "in the knowledge of him" for which Paul prays. That is where truth finally leads. It leads to the understanding of the Person of God.

Do you pray like that when you read your Bible? Do you open the pages and say, "Lord, show me yourself"?

- This is not merely a book to read in order to learn what is going to happen as prophecy is fulfilled.
- It isn't merely a book from which to get some ethical guidelines on how to behave in the relationships of life.
- Primarily and paramountly this book is designed to lead you to stand in the presence of the living God, to feel him, to know him, to

sense his love, his wisdom, his strength, his might, his incredible grasp of circumstances, his control of human events, and to enable you to understand your relationship to him, to have him stand in your presence living, breathing, compassionate. That is what the book is for. That is the wonder of it. No other book has that quality, but this one has. Christ can step out of the pages and be a living presence in your life and heart, if you pray and ask him to give you that spirit of wisdom and of revelation. But it will not come in any other way.

So, if your Bible study time is dull and dreary, take that as a hint and begin to pray that it might come alive, that you may know him. Remember what Jesus said in his great prayer recorded in the seventeenth chapter of John. He prayed, "Father, I thank you for our relationship, and I pray that men may know thee, the only true God, for this is eternal life," {cf, John 17:3}. And if you want life – life with that quality of abundance which characterizes God – then that is the way to have it. It comes with knowing God, knowing who he is and what he is like.

I remember reading some time ago in the *China Inland Mission Journal*, an account of two churches among a group of churches in a certain province in the inner part of China. These two churches flourished tremendously, while the others were just dawdling along at a slow pace. The mission director of that area became very interested in why these two churches were doing so much better than the others. He investigated and found that a couple of years earlier, at a conference in England, information had been given out regarding all these churches, and certain individuals had been requested to pray for the churches. One man took these two churches upon his heart and remained steadfast. Every week he had been praying faithfully for the Christians in these churches, that the truths they heard would be understood. The result was that these churches were like flowers with abundant sunshine and rain. They grew bountifully, while in the other churches the same truth was being taught, but no one seemed to grasp it and lay hold of it. This was tremendous testimony to the fact that prayer has this power to open eyes.

Now look at the last thing the apostle says in this introduction to prayer – the instrument by which this occurs: "having the eyes of your hearts

enlightened, that you may know ...” Then he lists the things they are to know (we’ll look at them in detail next Sunday):

- The hope of our calling, i.e., our future expectation;
- The riches of Christ’s inheritance in the saints, i.e., his present inheritance, and
- The exceeding greatness of God’s power, i.e., the present experience of the believer.

Paul’s prayer is that we may know these things, but they will come to us as the eyes of our hearts are enlightened.

That’s a strange expression, isn’t it: “the eyes of the heart.” We know how eyes are expressive. You can sometimes look at a face that seems dull and impassive, a “poker” face, but if you look at the eyes you can see something happening within. Oftentimes I have visited people in the hospital whose faces and whole bodies are wasted away, but their eyes are speaking volumes. Eyes are extremely expressive. And they are the instrument by which we perceive, by which we see things. The mind also has eyes. If you listen to truth in any area, or if you study a subject by means of a book, your mind is perceiving. The eyes of your mind are grasping ideas. But the apostle tells us here that not only does the mind have eyes, but the heart as well. The heart needs to see things, needs to grasp truth and understand it. And the heart is always used in Scripture as the seat of our emotions.

In other words, God is facing what the present generation has so beautifully rediscovered for us: We consist of more than mere minds operating; we need to have our emotions stirred and caught up and captivated by truth. Truth must come first to the mind, then to the heart. But the will is never properly motivated until the heart has been moved as well. The whole man must respond to the truth of God. When that happens, then a deep-seated certainty results. You will know something when both the mind and the heart have been touched.

You remember the episode which Luke records for us in his 24th chapter – that walk to Emmaus when the risen Lord appears to those two disciples. They are so defeated, so downcast by the horrible thing which has happened in Jerusalem. The Lord

joins them, but they don’t know who he is. He walks along with them as a stranger. And unfolds to them all the passages in the Old Testament Scriptures concerning the promised Messiah, including his sufferings and his resurrection. Do you remember what they said afterward as they were discussing this? They said to one another, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked with us along the way, while he opened to us the scriptures?” {cf, Luke 24:32}.

That “burning of heart” represents the eyes of the heart being opened. It is the enlightenment, the inflaming, of the heart, so that it comes alive, vital, and is deeply stirred and moved. It is this burning of heart that the apostle desires for these Christians. When the heart begins to burn with truth, when truth from the Word of God becomes so vivid and real to you that your heart is captured by it and you begin to burn, when it takes root in you and you simply must respond to it, that is when you know with certainty that God is real, that the hope of your calling is genuine, that the power of his presence is available, and that the riches of his ministry through you is manifest to others as well.

I could illustrate this in many ways. I remember an incident some time ago here at PBC. A young man became a Christian, came into the church, and married a girl who had grown up in this church. At first his Christian life was glorious to behold. He was warm, open, responsive, and eagerly read the Scriptures. But after a while it all began to ebb away, as often happens. Many Christians go through this experience. He turned cold, lost his interest in the Scriptures, and quit coming to church. He was no longer interested in fellowship with other believers and he avoided them. To use the term of a generation ago, he “back-slid.”

Naturally his wife became very concerned. So she and a friend decided that they would pray together for her husband every day. She decided in her heart that she would not nag him nor plague him nor push him. She wouldn’t urge him to come to church, and thus gain some kind of outward conformity by pressure, because she didn’t want him to come if his heart wasn’t in it. She resolved simply to pray. And she and her friend met daily. For a month or more nothing happened. He went on in pretty much the same way. But they took the advice of the Lord Jesus: “Men ought always to pray

and not to faint, not to give up,” {cf, Luke 18:1}. So they kept on praying.

Gradually her husband’s attitude began to change a bit. One day she came home and found him reading the Bible. But she didn’t say anything to him, and he didn’t say anything to her. But it was a note of encouragement. Then, one Sunday, he announced that he was going to church with her. Again she rejoiced inwardly, but didn’t make a big deal of it. After a while, he finally said to her, “You know, dear, I’ve really been way out of it! Somehow or other I lost all my interest in the Lord. But God has moved in, and met me, and brought me back.” And he came alive again. What a wonderful testimony to the power of prayer to open eyes!

It isn’t enough simply to teach truth. It isn’t enough to spread doctrine. It isn’t enough to have a Bible class in which you are getting the students to learn certain facts from the Scriptures. The Apostle Paul, and the other great leaders of the early church, understood man much better than that. You never get the whole man until the heart is moved, until the eyes of the heart are enlightened, until truth is moved from the head down to the heart, and thus it has gripped the emotions. Then the will is properly motivated. Then the person begins to grow tremendously.

So what an encouragement this is to a ministry of prayer!

- Pray for one another.
- Pray for the class that you teach.
- Pray for your children – that the truth they are learning, both at home and at Sunday school, will become vivid to them. How many times have we allowed them merely to learn factual matters, and have never prayed about it, and

then wondered why the truth doesn’t seem to affect them very much.

- Pray for your father and mother – that the truth they are learning may change their hearts so that they will be easier to get along with.
- Pray for your husband, pray for your wife – that this enlightenment of the heart may come.

See how Paul understands this and how he stresses it with us. He says, “For this reason ...” there is no use teaching you this truth unless I also pray for you, unless prayer changes your life so that you are ‘turned on,’ so that your hearts come alive with the truth of God.” And, if we do the same, we will understand that God has designed truth to make its appeal to the whole of our humanity, the whole being, the whole man, and we will become whole in Christ.

So let us pray together now.

Prayer:

Our Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for this revelation of the way we are made. Thank you for the wisdom of the Apostle Paul, who knew that you can’t simply pour out so many facts, write them down in a letter, and expect to have people grasp them and live by them. There must be the bending of the knee, the opening of the heart, the imploring of the Spirit, the bathing of the truth, the Word, in prayer, so that it becomes vital, living, attractive, compelling. Lord, help us to pray for each other. We need this truth greatly today, and we pray that you will drive it home to us with clarity and with power, in Jesus’ name, Amen.

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Hope, Riches, and Power

by Ray C. Stedman

I wonder how many of you are remembering my exhortation at the beginning of this series that you read through the book of Ephesians once a week until we have finished these studies. I'm sure that some of you have been faithful in doing this. Now, the rest of you repent, and begin again, will you? You will find that your life will never be the same again if you keep reading through this text thoughtfully and understandingly every week.

We have now arrived at the last part of the first chapter of this letter. We have been watching the Apostle Paul in his great concern for these Christians in Ephesus and the surrounding cities in the province of Asia. And we have learned from him that growth in Christians requires two fundamental conditions. It requires, first, the careful instruction of the mind in the great facts of reality. This is what Paul has been doing in the opening verses of this chapter – setting forth the broad sweep of God's truth, the undergirding reality of the Christian life, the great facts upon which our faith can rest. He is careful to see that this is done thoroughly.

But, as we saw last time together, that is not enough. Beside the careful instruction of the mind there must be the prayerful enlightenment of the heart. So Paul is not content to leave these people merely taught; he also prays that the eyes of their hearts be enlightened, that the truth which they have heard and understood with their minds will come alive and capture their hearts, that they will experience a kind of "divine heartburn" – like that of those two disciples whom Jesus met on the road to Emmaus and who said, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?" {Luke 24:32 RSV}.

I wonder if much of our teaching isn't lost because we are not faithful in praying for each other

that our minds be instructed and our hearts enlightened. It is so necessary that this truth not be held with the intellect only – a mere academic understanding of doctrine – but that it be gripping, vital, and compelling, and that we will see its full impact. This, of course, is the way God has designed us to operate: The teaching is to instruct the mind, the prayer is to awaken and enlighten the heart, and, thus, the will is enabled to act. And if people can't act as Christians it is very likely that one of these elements is missing.

Here we are dealing with the great problem of motivation. The apostle understood these Christians. He was a veteran warrior of the cross. He had been a Christian for many years by the time he wrote this letter and he had undoubtedly gone through all the varying experiences that a Christian can be subjected to. He knew the lukewarmness which can set in, the lethargic, apathetic attitudes which can sometimes arise after a warm and hopeful beginning. And, here, he saw these Christians as dispirited, listless, turned off, and he understood their need.

Perhaps many of you are struggling with this very problem. No Christian escapes this entirely in his lifetime. There are times when we simply get cold and our spirits grow apathetic. The apostle understood that. He knew that these people had lost sight of certain truth. They still held it with their minds – they would have been able to pass an examination on the doctrine involved – but they had lost sight of it in their hearts. It was no longer living, flaming, warm, compelling, motivating.

So the apostle turns to prayer, and his prayer reflects his understanding of their needs. He specifies three things: He is praying that the eyes of their hearts will be enlightened,

... that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe, {Eph 1:18b-19a RSV}

Hope, riches, and power.

You notice that he doesn't pray in general, as most of us tend to do. He doesn't simply say, "Lord, bless the Ephesians this morning." Most of us drop general, blanket prayer upon everybody and expect that to take care of the situation. But Paul knows these people better than that. He knows that they have lost their vision. That is part of their problem. They have sunk into an attitude of indifferent routine. It seems to them as though nothing is happening in their lives and they are going nowhere. They have lost their sense of hope. They know it as a doctrine, but they have lost the experience of it. So Paul prays that God will enlighten their hearts so that they may know the hope of God's calling, the hope to which he has called them.

1. You and I know the need for hope. This word, of course, is one part of the great triad found very frequently in the Scriptures – faith, hope and love – the essentials to living a full-orbed Christian experience. You find these linked together often in the pages of the New Testament.

Hope always concerns the future. These people obviously had lost their sense that anything happening now affected the future. And this happens to many of us. We are all waiting for the coming of the Lord, but it doesn't really turn us on very much. We know it as doctrine, but it isn't very exciting. These people had come to that place.

The hope of a believer is described for us very plainly in Romans 8, Verses 18-25, which we should read so that we will understand what hope he wanted to find awakened within their hearts:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. {Rom 8:18 RSV}

That is the hope – a glory which is coming, a glory toward which we are moving day by day. That glory is waiting for us, Paul says. It is a glory which touches the whole world:

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. {Rom 8:19-21 RSV}

That phrase, "the bondage to decay," is a very accurate description of what scientists call the Second Law of Thermodynamics, the law of entropy, the law which states that everything in the universe is running down, that it was wound up once but that now everything is declining, deteriorating. Paul includes not only the natural world, with its constant decay, but the human body as well. He says,

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly [and sometimes outwardly] as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. {Rom 8:22-25 RSV}

That was the hope which these believers entertained in their minds. They knew it academically. They knew that there was coming a day when their bodies would be redeemed, that God was working out that transformation, and that a whole new day was ahead. The central factor of this hope is the certainty of a new humanity. And you will notice that this hope is not just a faint possibility. It isn't an uncertain dream lying in the distant future. It is an absolutely guaranteed certainty, toward which we are now moving, that we will one day live in a whole new creation and will be men and women endowed with a spirit which can mount

up with wings as the eagle, a soul that can run and not be weary, a body which can walk and not faint, equal to the demands of the spirit.

We know how true it is, in the words of our Lord, that the spirit is often willing, but the flesh is weak. About the best we can manage to say is that the spirit is willing, but the flesh is ready for the weekend! We need rest; we look forward to relaxation. But there is coming a day, says God, when we shall be in a new body, and it will be equal to all the demands of the spirit, so that we never get weary or tired. We're looking forward to that day.

"Well," you say, "that's fine. I understand that. But how does that help me now? Now, I'm bored, I'm caught up in a meaningless routine. Day by day goes by, and life is not very exciting. How does that distant hope help me now?" The answer is that the Scriptures do not teach that all of this hope is going to be attained in one blinding flash at the end. I think that many Christians today misunderstand it in this way.

Perhaps these Ephesians did too, and this was their difficulty. What the Scriptures actually teach about this hope had never dawned upon them. And that is that this is not going to happen all at one moment in the resurrection which occurs at the end of life, or at the end of the age, but it is something which is happening right now. It is true that the body is ultimately redeemed at that future time, but the new creation is taking place right now.

Read the way Paul describes it in these most helpful words in Second Corinthians 4:

So we do not lose heart [we don't get discouraged]. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us [right now!] an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, ... {2 Cor 4:16-17 RSV}

That is what is happening now! I never read the phrase "this slight momentary affliction" without thinking of what Paul says a little farther on in that same letter when he describes his own experience: He had been beaten with rods three times and had received thirty-nine

lashes five times, he had been shipwrecked three times and a night and a day had been adrift at sea, he had even been stoned once (not on LSD or something like that – rocks had been thrown at him) and left for dead, he was in danger constantly on the sea and on the land, in danger from false brethren, spent many a sleepless night and many a day without food or drink. All this he catches up in one phrase: "this slight momentary affliction." And he says that this is working for us, it is preparing us. It is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.

That is what Paul is praying that these Christians will capture – the sense that God is at work in their daily circumstance, and that this is happening now, that, in the midst of the old creation, the new one is gradually taking shape. You can't see it, although perhaps as you look back you can see some of the results of it in your spirit and in your soul. But these very trials and pressures and problems and afflictions are preparing us for that future time.

That means that the flat tire you had on your car yesterday and which upset you so – just as you were in a hurry to go someplace you came out and found it there – is working for you. It is preparing you for this day. It is teaching you something about how to be patient, how to handle your pressures. It is giving you a chance to exercise some of the power of Christ which is available to you. That spot of shoe polish you got on your best dress, the weariness you feel at the end of the day, the arthritic pains in your shoulder, the spat you had with your best friend – all this, you see, is working together for your good. That is the point. That is what Paul wants these Ephesians to see. They are not lost in a meaningless routine of events, drifting through with some degree of numbness day after day. No, it is all working together. It is preparing them for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. Learn to look at life that way! That is the hope of our calling.

There is no circumstance we go through which cannot, in the hands of God, be turned to our advantage. Granted, we often allow ourselves an immediate failure at that point, but that failure is not the end of the story. We can go back and say, "Lord, I see now that I didn't

need to give way to the flesh, to its despair or its reaction of anger or impatience. Thank you for showing me that. When the situation arises again I'll be readier to rest upon your sustaining grace. I'll be more experienced in how to turn the problem over immediately to your strengthening hand upon which I can lean." When you begin to see that, then every moment, every event, is tinged with the flame of glory, with the touch of heaven upon it.

2. Paul knew also of their sense of impoverishment. He knew that these Christians tended to grow dull and flabby in their experience. They had begun with a vast comprehension of the greatness of God and the glory of life, and they had been set free from the habits which had held them in bondage and had limited their experience. But now, without realizing it, they were gradually drifting into a narrowness of experience. They were becoming limited and provincial. A sort of living rigor mortis was setting in. They were becoming established. (That means inflexible and rigid!) This condition afflicts many Christians.

I was in Portland, Oregon, yesterday. Some friends were telling me about a large evangelical church there, orthodox to the core, the people exposed to a great deal of Bible teaching. But the outstanding characteristic of that church is an increasing inflexibility and narrowness. Those who attend there are finding the walls of their lives moving in. They are limited in what they can or cannot do. There is a tendency to retire and to back away from life and not to get involved in the real issues. And they are gradually falling into a rut which is extremely unappealing and unattractive to others around, but they seem to be only dimly aware of it. This can happen to any of us.

But Paul is aware of this condition among these Ephesian Christians, and so he prays that they may know

... what are the riches of his [God's] glorious inheritance in the saints. {Eph 1:18c RSV}

Notice how he puts that. He is not asking that they understand that God is their inheritance. It is true that God is our resource. He

is our strength; we draw upon him. We belong to him, and he to us. And that is the great resource of the Christian life. But what Paul is emphasizing here is that we belong to God. We are his property. He has an inheritance in us. It is his delight to use us. And if we make ourselves available to be used, then enrichment and fulfillment beyond our wildest dreams await us. But if we are afraid to let God use us, we will narrow down into this living rut of experience, and we will find that the Christian life is gradually turning drab and dreary and dull and gray.

So what is needed is an understanding of the adventure which awaits anyone who makes himself available to God. This is Paul's appeal in Romans 12: "I beseech you, brethren, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice unto God," {cf, Rom 12:1}. Give him your life – day by day, not just in one crisis moment of dedication but in every situation. Say "Lord, do you want to use me in this situation? Okay, here I am. I'm available. I see this need right in front of me. Help me, Lord, not to pass by on the other side. Give me the grace to be available now. Lord, have you given me gifts? Is there equipment in my spirit that you want to use? Well, here it is, Lord; I'm available for you to use to meet this need." And then move out, venture out, plunge in, risk a little bit! As you do, you will discover that this brings enrichment of life, that your life gradually becomes delightful in its adventure, broad in its understanding, rich in its varied experience.

Yesterday I attended a conference at a beautiful estate on the Columbia River. It was a glorious autumn day. After the morning meetings I wanted a little chance to be alone so I took a walk. I was walking along a rather well-defined, wide path, when I saw a little trail wandering off to the side. I wondered where it went. It looked as if it headed down toward the river. I thought perhaps it might open up a vista of the Columbia River Gorge. It was a steep path, and I knew that when I came back up the going might be a little tough, but I decided to try it. I hadn't gone two hundred yards before I broke into a clearing where I had a tremendous, glorious view of the whole river, the gorge, the autumn colors, the cliffs, the mountains beyond. It was well worth taking

that path! I was thinking of this verse as I walked back up that path, thinking of how Paul prays that we might understand the riches of God's glorious inheritance in the saints – the thrill of being used of God. It struck me that I had just experienced a living parable of that. I had to take the chance that the path went somewhere. It didn't appear to be much of a path, it could have dwindled into nothing – so I had to risk something. But it was well worth the risk, because it enriched my life with the beauty of that scene.

And God is speaking in that way to you. Many of you are just waiting for God to tell you to do something. But the New Testament never instructs you to do that. Its message is: "God is with you; therefore reach out, risk something, venture, move out, plunge in, try something new that you've never done before and trust God to see you through it." The result will be fantastic enrichment of life. I wish we could take the time to have dozens of you in this congregation come up to the platform and share with us, as I know would be quite possible, how true this is, how you have found that as you ventured out for God it has opened up your life and enriched it beyond your wildest dreams.

There in Portland I ran into some folks who knew Dick and Pam Ewing. Many of you remember them from when they were at PBC while Dick was an intern. When they first came to us, Dick and Pam were such a quiet, retiring couple that you hardly ever even noticed they were around. We have to confess, as a staff, that some of us wondered if Dick would succeed as an intern because he was so quiet. But these folks gave me a report on what is going on in Portland. Dick and his wife moved up there near the campus of Lewis and Clark College, with no regular financial support at all – no group backing them. They went alone onto this campus. No other Christian organization is working there – just this couple. They met some students and invited them over to their home. They began to teach one or two of them the Scriptures and shared with them the truth that they had learned. They began to open up their lives to these students and helped them to see the richness of God. These first few brought others, and now there is a group of

forty or fifty college students meeting with them every day. Dick is still a quiet person. He is very shy and retiring, and he doesn't teach with a lot of power and persuasiveness. But the richness of his own life is an evident testimony to the truth of what he is saying, and he is becoming a tremendous force for God on that campus. And his own life, as he shares in his letters to us, is so enriched, so much greater than he ever dreamed it could be.

I was just reading the letter sent out monthly from Taiwan by Lillian Dickson. What an amazing story her life is! She responds to every need that comes her way – nobody mentions a need but that she doesn't do something about it. The result is that she has friends all over the world, and she has a ministry which is so rich and filled with exciting incidents that there is never a dull day, never a boring moment. Now, that awaits anyone – if you will let God have his inheritance in your life, if you will present your body to him and say, "Lord, here I am, available to you."

3. There is one final element in Paul's request here – that you may know

... what is the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe, {Eph 1:19a RSV}

The apostle knows that these Ephesian Christians, like Christians everywhere, are oftentimes immobilized by the grip of fear. He knows their insecurity. He knows that they are afraid of their neighbors, afraid of failure, afraid of persecution and ridicule. There is a deep sense of inadequacy and of impotence in their lives. They don't think they can do anything. They know how entrenched the forces of evil around them are and it seems hopeless to try to challenge any of the social situations of the day. They know what tremendous, relentless pressures the world can bring to bear upon those who seek to relieve some of these situations, and they are afraid.

The answer to fear is power. The minute you feel a sense of adequate power, you lose fear, because power overcomes fear. Love overcomes fear. These forces are mighty, powerful forces. And so Paul prays that

Christians will get their eyes open, in a practical way, to the power available to them – “that you may know ... what is the immeasurable greatness of his power in us [not up in heaven somewhere – in us] who believe.” I am often distressed by the fact that so many Christians seem to give up. They feel that their struggles are just too much, that they just can’t make it. It is because they have lost sight of the One who is giving them power.

- Paul develops this at some length here because it is so important to us. He wants us to see that this power was first demonstrated in the resurrection of Jesus:

... according to the working of his great might which he accomplished in Christ when he raised him from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places, {Eph 1:19b-20 RSV}

It is resurrection power. That means that it is different; it is not like any other power. It isn’t the power of a strong personality, nor of an educated mind. It isn’t the power of a good family background, nor of money, nor numbers, nor leadership ability. It is the power that raised Christ from the dead, that is able to bring life out of death. What does that mean in practical terms? Well, it means, as I have often said, that it works best in a cemetery. If you are living in a cemetery, if everything is dead and dull and lifeless around you, try resurrection power. That is what it is for. It means that this power takes no notice at all of obstacles, just as Jesus rose from the dead, paying no attention to the stone, to the decrees of Caesar, to the fulminations of the Jewish priests, nor to the guard in front of the tomb. Resurrection power doesn’t pay any attention to obstacles. It just surges on ahead, leaves the problems up to God, and goes on. It means that resurrection power requires no outside support. It doesn’t rely upon someone else, nor upon something else. It doesn’t need a vote of confidence. It doesn’t require any kind of undergirding expressions of support from anybody. It

can operate alone, completely alone, if necessary. And it means that it makes no noise or display. It doesn’t try to arrest attention by some publicity stunt. It just works quietly and, without any noise, effects its transformation, brings life out of death.

- And further, you will notice that the apostle declares that it is supreme in the universe:

... far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come; {Eph 1:21 RSV}

It is far above, greater than any other force, stronger than anything which can be launched against you. So believe these words! This is what the apostle is praying for – that you will really grasp this thought, understand that this is exactly what God means.

Some years ago a young man came to me with anguish in his eyes, obviously in agony. He told me of how he had been struggling to overcome a terrible passion, terrible feelings of lust which affected him all the time. These would sometimes grow so strong that he would fall back into habits which he knew were wrong and were horribly destructive of him and his loved ones, but he would give way nevertheless and he just couldn’t resist. We sat down and talked about power, about the power of a resurrected Lord, and what he has made available to us. I remember turning to this passage and reading him these words. At the time it didn’t seem to affect him much, but I said to him, “You know, God’s power is made perfect in weakness. Your problem is that you are trying to feel strong. You want to feel powerful. But God says, ‘No, resurrection power is the kind that works best when you feel weak.’ So if you feel weak, thank God. And the next time you find yourself threatened with being mastered by these surging lusts, run to Christ in helplessness. Commit yourself

to him again. Say ‘Lord, I can’t handle this myself. I can’t control myself. If you don’t help me, I’m sunk!’ And simply cast yourself upon him.” He said, “All right, I’ll try.”

A couple of weeks later, I saw him again. His face was wreathed with smiles when he came to me. He said, “You know, it works, it really works! I was reading again through that passage which you read to me, and I was struck by two words. It says that Christ is seated at God’s right hand in the heavenly places [i.e., in the seat of power in the universe], far above, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion. And those two words, ‘far above’, really opened my eyes. Why, of course,” he said, “if God is at work in me, and if he has that kind of power, then nobody else’s power even approaches his. No demonic force, no lustful urge, can be greater than the power of Jesus Christ. When I saw that fact, I was able simply to rest in the Lord, and it has been working. God has set me free!”

You notice that Paul stresses the fact that the name of Jesus is greater than any name that is named. When you name a name you are representing the resource upon which you intend to act. A policeman acts in the name of the law. The President of the United States acts in the name of the people. A salesman acts in the name of the company. And there are men and women today trying to act in the name of Satan. But here is a name which is above every name. Of any name that can be named the name of Jesus is greater, not only in time but in eternity as well, not only in this age but in the age to come. Never will there be a greater name than the name of Jesus. What encouragement that gives!

- The last thing that Paul tells us of this power is that it is all made visible in the church:

... and he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness [the

manifestation, the visible expression] of him who fills all in all. {Eph 1:22-23 RSV}

The only place this kind of power is ever going to be manifest is in you and me, in the midst of our pressures and problems – power to be patient (that takes power, doesn’t it?), power to love, when someone is irritating the socks off of you, but you must love him nevertheless (that takes power!), power to be joyful in the midst of distressing circumstances, power to be thankful, etc. That is what Paul talking about – power to live as God intended men to live.

This conference in Oregon yesterday consisted of a lot of new Christians, many of them teenagers, and some older couples who had been Christians for several years. There were some non-Christians present, agnostics. A young Jewish athlete was there. There was a crowd of about a hundred twenty-five people. I was teaching the New Covenant, the new arrangement for life made in Jesus Christ, and was stressing the fact that this is God’s provision to set us free from our inner hangups, to relieve us from guilt and fear and hostility and anxiety, to relieve all our inner tensions so that we are at peace within and can operate out of a sense of oneness and wholeness in God’s presence. I explained how this is so obviously available in Jesus Christ, and how it works, and I confirmed it with certain experiences.

At the end of one of the messages a man came up to me and rather abruptly said, “You know, we’re going to have to find some way to shut you up!” I wondered what he was getting at. He said, “If you keep on talking this way, men like me are going to be out of work.” I asked, “What do you do?” He said, “I’m a psychiatrist! But seriously, I want you to know that what you are saying, I have recently discovered, is the secret that can make psychiatry work.” We went on to converse, and I found that, not too long ago, he had become a Christian. And now he was enjoying the discovery of a secret he had puzzled over and wondered at before – why some of the psychiatric techniques he had been taught would work and others wouldn’t. Now he understood that a new power is available,

and that, in that power, these psychiatric approaches can be made to work consistently, and so he had begun to correct his psychiatry by the Scriptures.

So this is what God is telling us. He has come to give us hope, and riches, and power – power to be what he wants us to be, power to be what we, too, want to be.

Prayer:

Our Heavenly Father, we ask that this mighty prayer of this great apostle will become true of us – that the eyes of our hearts will be enlightened, that these words will not be merely empty words, not mere phrases that we repeat because they are in the New Testament, but that they will come alive in our experience and we too

will discover how encouraging it is that our failures are working for us “a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory,” that even in the times when we are distressed and we don’t handle the situation rightly, if we will turn back to you then that situation will work out to our advantage. Lord, we thank you for this encouragement that if we will venture even a little bit, our lives are going to be enriched thereby. And we are grateful that above all, and undergirding everything else, is this amazing power that is within us, that is quietly able to bring life out of death, hope out of hopelessness, joy out of sorrow, and beauty out of ashes. Lord, we ask that we will understand this and live by it and act on it, so that the world around will begin to see it in us. We ask in Jesus’ name, Amen.

The Human Dilemma

by Ray C. Stedman

I hope that you have already noted, in your reading of the book of Ephesians, this tremendous letter which so helpfully unfolds to us what life is all about, that its great theme is the unifying work of Jesus Christ, the restoring work of Jesus, how he has come to smash every barrier among men, to span every chasm, to break down every obstacle which divides and fragments humanity, and to unite all things together in him. (And he has already begun. This is not something he is going to do in one blinding flash at the end of time. The good news of the gospel is that he has already begun.) To do that requires, as Paul says in Verse 19 of Chapter 1, “what is the immeasurable greatness of his power.”

Last week we looked at Paul’s prayer for the Ephesian Christians and noted how he beseeches God that all his readers will understand, will come to grasp the amazing greatness of the power of God. Because if you take note of the power of God your life is never the same. When you really see the resources made available to us in Christ, and they begin to hit you with the impact that they deserve, you will never live the same way again. That is why Paul prays that the power of God may be evident to us, the power which breaks through the problems of men, and restores harmony and peace and joy in the midst of death.

But you will never understand these problems, as the apostle goes on to show us in Chapter 2, until you grasp the difficulties which our Lord faces, the condition of mankind in its lost state, how absolutely impossible it is for man to do anything to change himself. It takes the great power of God, and nothing else will suffice. That is the theme of the first half of Chapter 2. Then, in the second half, Paul deals with another obstacle which hinders the unifying work of Jesus, and that is the alienation of the Gentiles from the Jews, the fact that there was a division in humanity, a sharp and severe cleavage which kept the vast majority of the

people on the earth away from the knowledge of God. He shows how this has been dealt with. I offer this as a preview of the general outline of the second chapter of Ephesians.

But now, in this first section, Paul takes a look at the condition of man. As we read the first three verses, I would like you to remember that this is probably the most difficult truth in all of Scripture for human beings to believe. Here at the outset of this section is the revelation of a truth so difficult for us to understand and grasp, and believe, that most of us tone it down immediately, we simply water it down. We don’t accept it; we won’t believe it. As a consequence we have no realistic outlook on where we are – either on the tremendous hopelessness of our condition if we are without Christ, or on the glory and the wonder of our position if we are in Christ. But if you want to have your heart set on fire, listen carefully to these verses so that we might see what is the immeasurable greatness of his power which has cured this condition.

In the Revised Standard Version the first phrase of this chapter is, “And you he made alive...” But the translators borrow these words from a little later on in the chapter. Paul doesn’t really say that at this point. He is so intent upon getting before people the description of humanity and its problem that he just runs right on, ignoring grammar and everything else. This is a most ungrammatical sentence in the original Greek. But the translators bring this phrase in at this point in order that we will get the point Paul is driving toward.

And you he made alive, when you were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience. Among these we all once lived in the passions of our

flesh, following the desires of body and mind, and so we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. {Eph 2:1-3 RSV}

There is the apostle's great **analysis of the problem**. This is the difficulty which Jesus Christ faces when he comes to a man or a woman, a boy or a girl. And what it takes to break through this condition is nothing less than the immeasurable greatness of his power.

I said that this is difficult for us to believe, and it is largely because of the summary of the general state of man which Paul gives right here at the beginning. He says that you are dead, or you were dead, in trespasses and sins.

It is extremely difficult for us to believe that we are dead. If you come to a high school kid who is ready to go out for football, feeling the challenge of a new sport, involved with his friends in all kinds of exciting activities, and looking forward to building a life of his own, and you say, "You're dead," he will look at you with pity in his eyes. "What kind of person are you, some kind of nut?"

But listen to Paul's analysis and I think you will see what he means, and how accurate this description is. For there are two basic characteristics of death which we immediately associate with a dead person. I haven't had a lot of contact with dead people, but I'm sure that these two are always in view:

- One is their utter impotence, their powerlessness: Just before I stepped up here to speak, Roy Bradford was telling me that listening to this message in the first service this morning reminded him of an incident when one of our young men in this church, who was working part-time at a mortuary down the street, and living there, took Roy on a tour of the place one night. They came into the room where the bodies were lying out on slabs, and he pulled back a sheet and said to Roy, "Tell him about Jesus." Roy said, "I've never forgotten that! How impotent is a person who is dead! How impossible it is to reach him. How difficult, how absolutely hopeless it is for him to respond to any appeal, to do anything constructive in his condition." So impotence is the first mark.

- The second is corruption: The reason mortuaries exist is that dead bodies tend immediately to deteriorate. They decay, they fall apart, they lose their consistency, they begin to rot, to smell. You remember that in the story of Lazarus, Martha said to Jesus, "It's too late, already he stinks. He's been dead four days," {cf, John 11:39}. That is also a mark of death – corruption.

Impotence and corruption: The apostle uses two words here which relate to those two conditions, and these are the reasons why he says that men without Christ are dead:

1. First he uses the word *trespasses*, they are "dead through trespasses."

Do you know what a trespass is? This is a word which comes from a basic Greek word which means "to miss your step." If I start to walk off this platform and I aim at the first step, but I miss it and come down on another step, that is a trespass. I have misstepped. I didn't intend to; I aimed at the top step and intended to hit it, but I missed it. Though my intention was right, the result of my action was wrong.

This is what Paul says characterizes humanity. We are guilty of missteps. We don't mean to do it, but we end up missing the way. We start out with great ideals, most of us, with an image of what we would like to be. We aim at that, we try to be that, but somewhere we miss the mark, don't we? We don't fulfill our ideals, we don't realize our dreams. And even when we achieve the things we thought we wanted, we find them to be hollow pleasures indeed, empty and unsatisfying. Many of us suffer from that widespread disease of our day called "destination sickness," the malady of having arrived where you wanted to go, but not liking it when you get there, and remaining unsatisfied. That is the impotence of human life. We cannot fulfill our best ideals. No matter how hard we try, how much we resolve, something keeps us from them. That is a mark of the death which is present in humanity everywhere.

I was in San Diego this past week with the National Youth Workers Conference. Present there was Os Guinness, the brilliant young as-

sociate of Dr. Francis Schaeffer. He has written a book containing some very penetrating studies and analyses of present thinking among men. He has read all the books that the thinkers of today are writing about the future, about what is coming, and about what mankind can do about it. He has analyzed them very carefully. He has noted the polarization which exists in human thought between the extremes of a complete and utter pessimism, a stark, realistic pessimism which sees no hope whatsoever for the future beyond a few short years ahead – most of the books are like that – or naive and completely unrealistic optimism, such as is reflected in Huxley's *Brave New World*, which says that, despite all the problems, somehow we are going to work it all out. The mass of humanity swings desperately back and forth between those two extremes.

As he wrote his book, as he analyzed each bright, new, promising hope that men of this caliber set forth, he found the fatal flaw in each one – the fact that it would not work, could not work, does not work, has not worked when tried before in history. Gradually, he said, there came upon him as he studied an intense depression of spirit. He felt simply overwhelmed by the emptiness, the hollow mockery, of this kind of situation. And when he put it all together in a book he chose for the title these words: *The Dust of Death*, because that is what he experienced – the dust of death. He said that he came back to the Scriptures and to the resurrection of Jesus, and he saw that resurrection as a fresh wind blowing through all the dust of humanity's hollow dreams.

This is what Paul is saying. There is this well-intentioned, misstepping tendency within man which marks his death.

2. But beyond that, there are our sins. There are not only the times we fail when we meant to do right, but there are times when we intentionally and deliberately do wrong. Sin is the violation of truth when we know it to be truth. This is what creates the downward slant, the deterioration of life.

Most of us start in, as I have said, with rather high ideals and wholesome attitudes. We approach life, many of us, with good moral standards because of the homes and training

and background we have had – not all of us, but many. And we are the ones who find it most difficult to believe this passage. Yet all of us can remember that some of the things we do now with utter disregard, and total acceptance, horrified us when they were first suggested to us. And even when we first did them, we were uneasy of spirit. But now they have become commonplace, and we indulge without any difficulty at all. That marks the downward trend, the deteriorating faculty in life. This is a mark of death, an increasing corruption which, when it begins to be evident all over as our population explodes, produces this awful, terrible sense of despair and hopelessness and corruption which troubles us so on every side in human society today.

Now, that is Paul's analysis. See how accurate it is when you set it against life. No other philosophy can ever explain human life adequately. This is the condition of man.

Now Paul moves to **the explanation** of this. What is behind all of this? Why is this so universally true? His answer is three-fold. There are three forces at work, he says:

1. The first is:

**... following the course of this world,
{Eph 2:2b RSV}**

Literally it is, "following the age of this world." The age in which we live has a certain characteristic, a condition, and we are pressured by it. We are made to conform by the age in which we live. This is so demonstrable in life, isn't it? By *world*, Paul is referring to human society apart from God, not the earth itself, with its mountains and lakes and trees, etc. – that belongs to God – but the world, secular society, trying to live apart from God, determined to work out all its problems without any reference whatsoever to God. That world will produce a tremendous pressure to conform, to be governed by the world.

Haven't we all felt it? This is why fashions are always so powerfully influential among us. We hardly dare be different. Or if we are different, we break away completely

and form another society whose members are made to conform within it. That is why you never see a hippie with a crew cut. They don't like crew cuts. They reject short hair because that is a pattern they have learned to associate with something else they reject. But in the world of hippiedom everybody must have long hair. You must conform to that. And if you try to break away from it you will form a new society, a new pattern, in which it is the style, de rigueur, to have medium-length hair. But in any case, you see, there is always this pressure to conform.

But conformity is not only in the realm of fashion; it is in the way we react, in our attitudes. We are governed by the attitudes of our associates, and we are pressured to conform by our peers around us. That is the world, and what tremendous pressure it exerts! How it rejects anybody who is noticeably different!

That is why the world hates genuine Christianity. Genuine Christians belong to neither of the extremes which are always present in society. They have to contrast with both. And therefore they get attacked from both sides, if they are really standing where Christ stands. One of the indications of whether your Christianity is genuine or not is whether you do get attacked from both sides, because Christianity is a third way of life.

2. Yet beyond the world, says Paul, lies something else – a sinister being. He calls this force

... following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience. {Eph 2:2c RSV}

Do you see how he is taking us back, back, behind the facades, behind what we call the normal activities of life. He is tearing off the veil and revealing to us what is really there. He says that there is an organized realm of malevolent beings, headed by a ruler of incredible subtlety and power who is at work behind the world scene to create disobedience. That is the Devil's stock in trade – disobedience.

Paul calls him "the prince of the power of the air." I don't think he means literally the

oxygen/nitrogen mixture we breathe, although perhaps – who knows? There may be some hint to that effect here. Who knows but that the Devil has in some way twisted the physical atmosphere. I'm a bit tempted to pursue this idea and to see what might be involved in the thought that the very air we breathe is more than polluted, that it is twisted. But this is at least a metaphorical reference to the fact that as the air pervades our environment and yet is invisible to us, so the Devil and his angels, and all the vast realm of demonic beings arrayed against God, are surrounding us on every side, invisible to us and yet constantly manipulating the human race by means of the pressures of the world and, as we'll see later on, the flesh, affecting the minds and hearts and thoughts of men so that they act disobediently.

Well, disobedient to what? You must have something to obey in order to be disobedient. What is Paul referring to? It is truth. The God of truth is always trying to capture our attention and to set reality before us. But there is an evil spirit at work in society which is constantly saying, "When you see it as truth, don't do it!"

You can illustrate in a thousand ways how that works out. It is amazing what a commitment we have to disobedience! This is why we have to have litter laws, for instance. It should be sufficient merely to point out to people that if you throw beer cans along the road you are going to destroy the beauty of the road. Merely putting up a couple of signs to remind people of that fact ought to be enough. But it isn't, is it? People throw the cans out and hit the signs which say: DON'T LITTER. There is a disobedient spirit at work.

This is why our initial reaction to some demand is almost always, "Why should I? Who do you think you are? Why should I do what you ask?" Or even, if someone requests something of us, our first reaction is "Well, tell me why. I want to know that first." There seems to be a tinge of disobedience about almost everything we do. Why is that? The apostle says that it is because a disobedient spirit, one who is constantly challenging every single law and force which God has called into being, is at work. He is assaulting us and

working through us, constantly trying to get us to be disobedient to the truth that we know.

3. Now Paul goes further, bringing this right down to the individual. We have looked at society, back of which is the malevolent cruelty and malicious design of the Devil, a being of incredible power, subtlety, and wisdom, with whom none of us is able in any degree to match wits – he'll trap us every time, as he has all through the history of the world. But when it comes right down to it, it comes right out at the individual level. Paul adds,

Among these we all once lived in the passions of our flesh [literally, the desires of the flesh], **following the desires of body and mind, {Eph 2:3a RSV}**

That brings it right out to where you and I live, doesn't it? The *passions* of the flesh is an individual matter. Paul uses a Greek word here which is used elsewhere in Scripture, many times, both for good and bad. He calls them the "lusts of the flesh," the passions or the desires of the flesh.

Don't immediately read that as being bad. The flesh is our basic human nature. It is the way we human beings are constructed. We live in a body of flesh and bone. But the Scriptures indicate that something has happened to that flesh, that something has gained control of it and has begun to twist it, and Paul shows us in a moment just what that twist is. But there are also good things about the flesh. That is, there are basic desires of the flesh which God created. Among them are hunger and thirst, the desire for sex, the desire for attention, for acquisition of goods, and the enjoyment of pleasure – all these things. And there is nothing wrong with them. Jesus used the very word which here is translated *passions* when he said to his disciples in the upper room, "With great desire have I desired to eat this passover with you," {Luke 22:15}. Literally, "With much lust have I lusted to eat this passover with you." So lust is not always wrong, and the apostle recognizes that this is the case. We human beings have normal, natural desires – we want to eat, we want to drink, we want to

sleep, we want to have sex. These are perfectly proper desires.

But Paul uses another term here which shows that there is a twist to them. The satanic treachery comes out at this point – what is translated here "the desires of the body and of the mind" is a subdivision of these passions of the flesh. The word he uses for "desires" is really the word *will*. It carries with it the thought of an unbreakable resolve, a determination. Perhaps the nearest English equivalent today is the word "drive." These passions become drives. And when they become drives, they become wrong. That is the subtlety of this.

What is wrong with eating? Why, nothing! If you don't eat, then you won't live. But where do we cross the line between a normal satisfying of our appetites and a normal enjoyment of food for pleasure – because God made us that way – and gourmandism and gluttony, where we live for eating, where we keep records of all the restaurants that serve the finest food, where we study them and we plan feasts and we build much of our life around them, and thus we sacrifice the relationships of life which are truly important in order that we may indulge in eating? Then it becomes a drive, it masters us. That is what Paul is talking about here – the drives of the body.

What is wrong with sleeping? Nothing. (Some of you are catching up on it right now!) But when you try to spend much of your life sleeping and allow it to interfere with the normal development of your life, then it becomes a drive, and that is wrong.

What is wrong with sex? Do I have to illustrate how twisted we are in this area? There is nothing wrong with sex. God made it. It is a perfectly proper practice of humanity. God likes it; he designed it. But when it becomes a drive that we build our life around, that we must have, to which we sacrifice other values, then it becomes idolatrous and is one of these drives, these inordinate passions, "inordinate affections" Scripture calls them elsewhere, or sometimes it calls them "deceitful urges" – promising us much but delivering little.

And then Paul moves on to show that these drives involve not only the body – these things which concern our physical life – but also the

mind, the thought life. This too can be an expression of the lusts of the flesh in this wrongful sense. Here we have attitudes such as indignation and hurt, and emotional responses such as attraction to people, etc. Are these wrong? No, they are right. But when they become jealousy and envy and malice and bitterness and desire for revenge, they can seize us and enslave us. They can begin to run our lives so that we build our lives around them, so that everything we do is related to some terrible envy – we want to show that we are better than someone else – or we want to get even with someone and so we spend hours and hours of our life planning and scheming and maneuvering and manipulating, trying to get revenge. That is a drive, a will of the mind.

Or take other perfectly normal things, e.g., reading books. That can be terribly wrong. It can become a controlling passion in our lives, which is wrong. Anything which controls us, for which we begin to sacrifice normal relationships, and which begins ultimately to enslave us, is the very sort of thing he is talking about here.

This is what produces the trespasses and sins which mark the death of humanity:

- Do you see how subtle this is, how widespread, how deeply embedded in life, how inescapable it is?
- Who of us can win over this?
- Who can distinguish when we've passed the line?

None of us is capable of it. That is why the condition of humanity is hopeless.

Now look at how it all comes out. **The inevitable results**, Paul says, are:

... and so we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. {Eph 2:3b RSV}

We are children of wrath. We are subject to the “wrath of God.” I don't know what that term means to you. I was teaching the book of Romans

to a group of Young Life leaders this week. We were discussing this subject. It became apparent to me that they had very mistaken ideas of what this means. They felt that it were as though some kind of a cosmic, terrible-tempered Mr. Bang is sitting up in the heavens, ready to torture fiendishly anybody who steps out of line, as though God is looking down at us as we try to struggle on and live our normal lives, and is shouting down at us, “CUT THAT OUT, OR I'LL ZAP YOU!” That is the usual concept of the wrath of God. But that isn't what this term means.

Paul analyzes it for us in Romans. The wrath of God is what we might call “the law of inevitable consequences,” the fact that what we do will have consequences. If we make a wrongful decision it will affect us, it will hurt us – even though we intended it to be right.

If I should suddenly decide to stride off and walk right into that wall I would suffer the wrath of God. I would be hurt by it. That wrath is designed to awaken me, to make me realize that I am violating a basic law of my own nature.

If I shove my hands into my pockets and nonchalantly decide to stroll off the top of a 20-story building with a hope that I'll make it, I'll suffer the wrath of God. It would be what you'd call jumping to a conclusion!

There are a lot of people who are acting that way these days. Art Linkletter's daughter jumped out of a window because, deceived by psychedelic drugs, she thought she could fly. But she suffered the wrath of God – even though she intended to do right.

Why is it that we accept the wrath of God in those physical terms and don't struggle with it – we know life is that way – but when it moves into the moral realm we get all upset? We say, “It isn't fair. Why shouldn't I run off with my neighbor's wife? Why shouldn't I find the happiness I desire after years of having to live with this slob I've been married to? Why should I experience any evil results from that?” But it is the same kind of law which applies, the same situation. And evil results will come, inevitable consequences which will destroy our humanity, tear down the beauty of human dignity within us. We will become brutalized, dehumanized, depersonalized – all these terms which are being thrown around today. That is the wrath of God.

And we are subject to that, Paul says, because of these great forces at work: the Devil, with his clever, subtle strategies, working through the world to force us to conform to patterns which destroy, and working through the flesh, so that we never know where to draw the line and thus we move in utter naivety from a normal satisfying of human need into that excess which destroys.

And, Paul says, furthermore, it is “by nature.” Don’t miss those two words. They mean that we are born this way. We are born into this condition, and there is nothing we can do about it!

I don’t know how to make that any clearer. Ultimately, education, legislation, a change of environment – all these “remedies” which we propose as releases from this condition – will rearrange the pattern but will never change the basic problem. That is why humanity struggles endlessly trying to correct itself but never succeeds, never succeeds!

Do you know of any other philosophy which can explain life in realistic terms like that, which squares with history as that does? We are born into this condition. There is no escape, no way out. We are part of a fallen humanity.

So, Paul says, we are “like the rest of mankind.” It is universal. It isn’t a question of race or sex. It doesn’t matter whether we are men or women, whether we are born into a civilized country or reared as savages in the jungle – the condition is still the same. There is no escape, no escape – except for the next two words, “But God, ...” {Eph 2:4a RSV}.

Now, you see, if you want to learn how to value your salvation and to praise God with a heart which is simply enraptured by what God has done, you need to understand the depths from which you have come as a Christian, the condition from which you have been released. The condition is still present in our Christian lives whenever we choose not to act upon the available resources of Jesus Christ within us. But in the non-Christian there is no hope without God, no hope.

And if anything should make us praise God, it is to understand this tremendously hopeless condition in which humanity is lost, unable to help itself, struggling, miserable, wretched, unfulfilled, unsatisfied, getting worse and worse, more corrupt, and trying in all sincerity to find answers on every side – and nobody puts down the efforts of men to try to find a way out – but we’ll never, ever, handle life properly, or understand history, until we accept this divine revelation of the condition in which we live. Then we can say at last, “But God,” but God, ...”

That is where we are going to start next Sunday.

But if you are recognizing now that you are in this condition, the answer will lie in what God has said about Jesus Christ, and in no other place, “for there is no other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” {cf, Acts 4:12}, but the name of Jesus.

Prayer:

We praise you, our heavenly Father, for the fact that you are such a God of realism and truth that you dare to tell us the truth even though we don’t want to hear it. You lay it before us in the simplest of terms, and we hide our eyes from it and run from it and refuse to look at it, refuse to say that it applies to us, but nevertheless it does. And, our Father, in love you pursue us and work with us and bring us to experience your wrath, until we see how foolish we’ve been and how stupid we are, and turn at last to the one way out provided for us. Thank you for our Lord Jesus. How we rejoice in him who came and entered the race so that we might find the way out. We thank you for this and ask that it may become clearer and clearer to us, and that we will rejoice and give thanks and live to the praise of your glory because of it. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

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But God ...

by Ray C. Stedman

The title of our study this morning consists of two little words: But God... These open the fourth verse of Ephesians 2, the chapter in which the Apostle Paul is setting forth the greatness of our salvation and is helping us to understand what has happened to us in Jesus Christ. Nothing is more important than that we grasp these great words:

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, {Eph 2:4-6 RSV}

Those two words, *But God*, represent a contrast. You remember that last week we looked together at the opening verses of this chapter to see what the condition of man is, as God sees him, as he actually is in life. In contrast to that gloomy picture the apostle now says, "But God, ..."

I don't think any of us has any idea of what life would be like if God suddenly ceased his redemptive processes among us. I am sure that within hours there would be mass suicides all over the earth, because every bit of glory would be removed from life, every bit of joy, every bit of gladness, all those moments that we delight in when the family gathers around and gives us a sense of security, of warmth and joy together. All this would be gone. For these blessings come from God's activity among men, from God at work redeeming, reaching out, seeking to arrest the attention of men and women and boys and girls all over the earth. If all that suddenly ceased, life would become incredibly dull and drab and dreary.

Now, life teaches us that there are times when God does temporarily withdraw his blessing from

life and his goodness from us, and invariably life then turns impossible to live. I was in Newport Beach this week, and a woman there was telling me about her neighbor who came across the street one day to talk with her. He was in utter despair, and he sat there with his head in his hands and a cup of coffee steaming untouched in front of him. And he cried out in an agony of spirit, "God, but I'm bored!" That is the way life is for so many. Life is utterly dull, drab, lonely, and miserable.

Why is that? Well, the Apostle Paul tells us that this is the result of the condition into which we are born. And the only thing which alleviates it is the mercy and the grace of God. It would always be that way – every moment of life would be that way – were it not for God's goodness poured out upon us, to the just and the unjust alike, in his attempt to reach us and arrest us. So these words come through to us with great meaning: "But God, ..."

The apostle is very careful to inform us immediately of what it is that moves God to act, and he focuses on that: "But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, ..." That was the condition in which we were found. But God began to move. What moved him? The first thing, the apostle says, is his mercy.

I wonder if you understand what mercy is? And especially what the difference between mercy and grace is. These are terms which we bandy around frequently, especially in studying the New Testament. We use them all the time, but we often don't understand what they actually mean, and sometimes we don't distinguish between these important words.

A little boy in Sunday School was asked to tell the difference between kindness and loving-kindness, because Scripture uses both those words.

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He put it this way: “If I ask my mother for a slice of bread and butter, and she gives it to me, that is kindness. But if she puts jam on it, that is loving-kindness!” That is great theological truth! That is a beautiful illustration of the difference between these terms.

And there is a difference between mercy and grace. It is true that God’s grace reaches out to man also, but it does so for a different reason than his mercy does.

I wonder if you know the difference?

It is the guilt of man which draws forth the grace of God. When God looks at us and sees us as guilty – as actually having made choices and done things which were deliberately wrong when we knew them to be wrong – it calls forth his compassion, expressed in grace. Even though we deserve it, he still doesn’t want to leave us in our guilt. So his grace is aroused and he reaches out to find a way to set aside the demands of law and to relieve us from the due punishment of our guilt and to set us free. And he has done that. It is the grace of God which has dealt with our guilt.

But it is our misery which calls forth his mercy. You parents know how this is. If you have a child who is suffering from a severe cold – his throat is sore, his eyes are watering, his nose is running and all stuffed up so that he can hardly breathe, he is aching in every joint, and he is miserable and all he can do is throw his arms around your neck and cry – what does that do to you as a parent? Why, it awakens your pity, and you reach out and try to relieve this condition in some way if you possibly can, because his misery has called forth your mercy. That is what Paul says has awakened the mercy of God – the misery of man.

He has just detailed this for us in the verses which open this chapter. He tells us that, as a race, we are dead in a helpless, impotent condition. We are corrupt, decaying, and life is on a downward slant. He reminds us that we are molded by the world around us, we are gripped by this passion for conformity, and we find it very difficult to break away from the established trend. We don’t want to be different, we are forced to conform in attitudes, in ways of reacting mentally, as well as in clothing and standard of living. And this holds us in bondage. We can’t be the independent people we would like to be.

And further, you remember, we are controlled by Satan. There is a spirit which works in us, Paul

says, which prompts us to disobey. Our first reaction to any demand almost invariably is one of belligerence. “Who gave you the right to tell me what to do? Why should I do this?” We come at life with a chip on our shoulder, and we are immediately defensive or belligerent. We learn to cover it over, we learn to smile and to be sweet, but inwardly we feel resentment at having to conform to someone else’s desires. That is the spirit of disobedience which is constantly at work in humanity, making us strike out at one another and injure each other.

Finally, there is that whole realm of life which the apostle gathers up in the phrase “fulfilling the lusts of the flesh” {cf, Gal 5:16} – these impulsive urges within us which lead us to desire certain things, or to hold certain attitudes, or to insist upon certain modes of action. We don’t stop to reason them out. If we did we would see that they are wrong. But we rationalize them, we find excuses for them, and when our mind is able to invent a reason we act on it. The result, again, is that we injure each other and we destroy peace in a household, or in a family, or a company, or a nation. And this creates the heartache, the despair, the rejection, the discontent, the disillusionment, the sense of disenchantment, the boredom, the routine, the monotony, the frustration of life. That is why we spend so much of our time in this condition – the tragic sense of life.

We are so aware of all this with regard to what others do to us, and so little aware of how we are doing the same thing to them. Isn’t that amazing? Our image of ourselves is always so much better than what we actually are. It is so easy to forget the nasty little things we say, the sharp and caustic remarks we make, and the irritated attitudes we come to breakfast with. After awhile we forget about all of these, and as we look at ourselves we see what we love to call “beautiful people,” with just a slight taint here or there that a good resolution would clear up. God doesn’t see us that way. But we see ourselves that way and we can’t understand, then, why life doesn’t smooth out, why there is so much frustration and boredom in our experience, why we are always being so injured and hurt and cut.

But God sees all this realistically and he says, “That is what is making you miserable.” This kind of condition is everywhere. It is shared with the rest of mankind. God sees the misery and heart-

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ache caused by it – the tears, the disappointment, the crushing sense of frustration, of weakness, of inadequacy. He sees the misery, the abject misery of human life. And, more and more, this is becoming apparent to us as well, isn't it? But this is what calls forth God's mercy. It awakens his love to reach out to us. He wants to do something to relieve the misery of man. That is what Paul says is happening.

God's mercy touches his love – and love is active: "... out of the great love with which he loved us..." What the apostle has in mind here is the cross, and, behind it, the whole story of Jesus' coming to Earth. That is the sign of the love of God. How do we know that God loved us? Well, because "God so loved the world that he gave ..." {John 3:16a}. This is always the mark of love.

I think that husbands, for instance, have a great deal of difficulty in understanding and acting in response to the command of Scripture to love their wives: "Husbands, love your wives" {Eph 5:25, Col 3:19}, because they don't understand what love is. To most of us, love is a kind of feeling, an affectionate feeling, which we do have at times towards our wives, thank God, and with which we started the whole process of marriage. But it isn't always there. Nevertheless, husbands are told to love their wives. Yet if love is nothing but this feeling, this itch around the heart that you can't scratch, this uncertain attitude which is nice to have but that isn't always present, then it is impossible to obey that exhortation to love your wife.

But that isn't what love is. Love is a will, a choice that you make. Love is an active moving-out to meet the needs of someone else. That is why the Scriptures say, "If any man hunger, feed him, if he is thirsty, give him to drink" {cf, Rom 12:20}, because that is when you love him. You love somebody when you respond to his needs. That is the meaning of love. When a husband begins to meet his wife's needs – to find out who she is, where she is in life, what she wants, and what she needs, and begins to work at supplying those needs – that is when he begins to love his wife. And that is when a wife begins to love her husband.

And this is what God is talking about. Paul is saying, "God loved us and he did something about it. He came here." He is not a God of indifference or unconcern. He was touched with our misery and he came and he wept and he suffered. He became the poorest of the poor, he felt the pinch of poverty.

He was rejected, he felt hurt, he was frightened, he felt all the trials which come into our lives. And when he had fully identified himself with us, he went out and, in the indescribable anguish and pain of the cross, for no reason in himself, he bore our sins. Of course, Paul doesn't mention that specifically at this point; it comes in later in the epistle. But it is the background, the necessary groundwork, for what follows here. It is gathered up in the great idea of the love of God, reaching out to us. And he did it, says the apostle, when there was nothing in us which could help him in the least degree, when we were dead in our trespasses. We have done nothing to break through this pattern of human misery.

I hope we all understand that very plainly. This is the biblical view of life, and it is accurate – it fits history. This is the reason why you can go back through history and read about all the struggles of men in the past – in the Middle Ages, at the time of our Lord, in the Golden Age of Greece, back in the Persian Empire, as far back in history as you can go – and you will find that men and women then were struggling with exactly the same problems, and feeling the same hurts, and the same abject miseries, and were living in a dull, gray world governed by human hatred and fratricide and war, all exactly the same, exactly the same, as today.

We hear the prophets of our day who say that man has learned so much, that we have had an explosion of knowledge, that we now have technological possibilities which men never even dreamed of before, and that, with all this vast knowledge, we ought to be able to solve the problems of life much more readily. But the truth is that we have not learned one thing about relieving human misery and hurt. Our cities today are largely great pools of human misery, stirring with hatred and strife, and ready to break out in riot and revolution at a moment's notice. That is how much all the knowledge that humans have gathered through the centuries has meant in relieving, in actually breaking through this human condition.

When we were dead, when we were absolutely hopeless, then God did something. This is what the apostle wants us to see. God took action. God broke through. And what he accomplished did break the spell of evil, and began to set us free. All of this, as you know, becomes available to us when we believe in Jesus Christ.

But God ...

Now the apostle moves to help us understand that. What happened when you believed? What did God do which has broken this pattern, and how does it work?

I don't hesitate to say that if we don't understand this clearly we will never be able to enter into the riches that are ours in Jesus Christ. We will always be groveling around, trying to live a good Christian life, struggling and discovering a few helpful things here and there, but watching others go on into freedom and liberty and joyfulness and beauty of character, while we ourselves never seem able to discover the secret. We must understand thoroughly what has happened to us.

There are three things that the apostle brings out:

- First, Paul says, God “made us alive together with Christ,” and, in parentheses, he reminds us, “(by grace you have been saved)” – the grace of God, and not the activity of man. Man does not add a thing to this. There is not one thing which man adds to this work of redeeming broken human lives, not one thing. He never can. It is utterly by grace. So the first step is that we are made alive together with Christ.
- Then comes the second: “raised up with him,” and
- The third: “made to sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.”

Those are not merely theological phrases. They represent realities which have already happened, and which we need desperately to understand.

We will take only the first of them this morning. I'd like you to examine with me the phrase “made us alive together with Christ.” That is only two words in the Greek language. One word gathers up “made us alive together with” – all one word: he *enlivened* us, with Christ. There you have the central secret of the Christian life. We were made alive in Christ. That happened when you believed in Jesus.

I don't know what your feelings were like at that moment. Most people don't experience very much when they become Christians. It is usually a quiet sensation – maybe a slight sense of peace came over you, perhaps a little relieving of your

emotions. With some there is a sense of joy, but it usually is not very dramatic.

I have had the joy of leading scores of people to Christ, and almost always it is very, very quiet. And yet it is a tremendous thing which has happened! It is all the difference between death and life!

If we had a corpse here on this platform this morning, and it had been dead for four or five days, and if we had known this person in life, but we knew now that he was utterly dead, that he had lost all ability to think, to react, to communicate, to move, or to live in any sense whatsoever, and if we had the power to lay hands on him so that he came to life again here and now – this would be heralded all over town within hours, wouldn't it? We would be astonished at what a miracle had happened.

And yet that is exactly what the apostle says occurs in the inner life of man when he passes from death to life, when he believes in Jesus Christ. That same dramatic, completely contrasting condition occurs within us. We are no longer dead when we believe. We are alive in Jesus Christ. A life has been imparted to us.

There are a great many similes in Scripture to help us understand some of these things: One of them is the whole process of birth. Becoming a Christian is likened to being born again. But where does birth start? We know that it doesn't start with the actual entrance of the baby into the world. It starts with conception. And conception takes place in an act of love when the ovum and the sperm are joined together. But the mother doesn't know anything about it – she doesn't feel that. Yet a remarkable thing has occurred within her body, something which she doesn't sense, but which, nevertheless, is going to change her life and perhaps the history of the entire world – as many babies have changed the history of the world when they have grown up.

That is exactly the kind of thing which Paul brings to our attention here. When we are born again in Jesus Christ we receive life from him. We're made one spirit with him. We are no longer dead, no longer unresponsive to God. We are made alive in Jesus Christ.

Another thing which is helpful in understanding this is to realize that something has happened to our attitude. We simply are not the same person from that time on. And it begins to show almost immediately. I have learned, for instance, to start look-

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ing for a certain sign which is almost invariably manifest within moments after a person becomes a Christian – their self-centeredness ends, momentarily at least, and they begin to think of someone else. I have seen this happen so many times at the moment someone has come to Christ and they I have had a minute or two to think of what has happened to them. So often they will say, “Oh, I wish you would tell this to my brother,” or, “I wish you’d pray about my parents.” Immediately their thoughts turn away from their own great experience to someone else with whom they want to share it. That is a mark that they have come alive in Jesus Christ. When we first started talking all they were concerned about was: “Me. What’s happening to me? Where am I going? What’s happening in my life?” But almost immediately after they receive Christ there comes this reaction which starts to reach out to someone else. That is passing from death unto life.

There is also a reaction immediately evident in their attitude toward God. Have you noticed that non-Christians are afraid of God? They don’t want to come around church because they see people enjoying the presence of God there, and it makes them feel uneasy. That is perfectly all right – they shouldn’t be expected to come to church in order to find God. God reaches out to them where they are, through his people. But they are afraid of him. And this is why they are afraid of death. This is why non-Christians don’t like even the thought of death. You watch them at a funeral. They are restless and uneasy and nervous, hoping to get the whole thing over as quickly as possible so that they can get back to the familiar surroundings of a bar, or their home, or someplace where they again can escape the thought of death. Why don’t they like death? Because they know that it introduces them to the presence of God, and they are afraid of God. They are uneasy about the thought of God. They don’t want God. They are hiding and running from him.

But when they become a Christian that changes immediately. Have you ever noticed it? Immediately. God is now their Father. They have a sense of belonging. And now the one person they want above all others is God, and they cry as did the Psalmist, “As the hart panteth after the water brook, so pants my soul after thee, oh God,” {Psa 42:1 KJV}. “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want,” {Psa 23:1}. Immediately there is a hunger

for God. That is passing from death to life. They are beginning to live as God intends men to live.

But the greatest thing of all, of course, is that great, central fact, the most important truth in all of Christianity, which is stated right here: “We are made alive together with Christ.” Notice that Paul says “with Christ” three times:

1. “We are made alive together with Christ.”
2. “We are raised up with him.”
3. “We are made to sit with him.”

The greatest fact of all is that we are joined to Jesus Christ. He has come to live in us. And more than just coming to live in us, he has joined himself to us, and we are one person with him. That is the most important fact upon which to build all the rest of Christian faith and experience – this great, tremendous statement that we are made alive with Jesus Christ, joined with him.

Do you remember how the Lord himself taught that? He said, “I am the vine, you are the branches,” {John 15:5a RSV}. Can you tell where the branch ends and the vine starts? No. They are one plant, sharing one life together. So from here on our identity is no longer “in Adam,” but it is “in Christ.” We are no longer just ordinary human beings. We are new creations, begun again, linked with the life of Jesus Christ. And that is our identity from then on.

Remember that later in this letter Paul likens the church to a body of which Christ is the head. Have you examined your body lately? Have you noticed, for instance, that your fingers don’t come off if you merely twist them a half-turn and pull? They are tied to the body. They share the life of the body. They are not attached by any mechanical process. They are an organic part of it. These figures are all held up before us to show us the intimate way we are united to Jesus Christ, to tell us that he is our life. And that is who we are, from here on.

So never think of yourself in any other way, because the whole work of the enemy is to get you to disbelieve that, and to go back to thinking that you are just an ordinary individual, struggling on through life, trying to make it the best way you can, needing to mobilize all your human resources to try to get ahead of the other fellow and to achieve as much of the fulfillment of life as you can. And anytime you believe that, you go right back to act-

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ing as you once did – back to the misery, back to the heartaches. You can escape that only when you come back again to this central truth – we are alive in Jesus Christ!

There is one final thing to notice here. These verbs are all in the past tense. This is something which has happened, not something which is going to happen. It has already occurred when you believed in Jesus Christ.

You don't have to work toward it. It is not something which great saints achieve after years of effort. It is something which is already true, and every Christian has this experience. We were made alive in Jesus Christ.

We are not the same. We cannot be the same again, anymore. We cannot go back to living the way we once did. Even if we try, we won't be able to. This is why I sometimes say to people who get discouraged with their Christian life, "Well, quit then, go back, try not to be a Christian. See what will happen." They can't do it, and they know they can't, because they are new creatures, made alive in Jesus Christ. A new humanity has begun.

Next week we will go on together to discover the other two steps. But, in the meantime, never let yourself forget the great fact that you are changed, that you are a new creation, that you have begun a new relationship. There is no way you can erase it, and no way you can lose it. You are made alive

together with Christ, and that is the basis of all your experience from here on.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, we give thanks to you for this great truth. We pray, if any among us here haven't yet found it to be true, that even in the quietness of this moment they can experience this new life in Jesus Christ, that they will open up their hearts and say, "Lord Jesus, I need you, and you promised to come in, so come in, Lord," and that this great transaction will take place so that they will never be the same again. And we who have found it to be true, Lord, ask you to make plain what this means – that this is who we are, and that we will never be able to handle life aright until we first know who we are. Help us to remember this, and impress it on our hearts and minds again and again that we have been made alive in Jesus Christ, called out of darkness into light, delivered from the power of Satan into the kingdom of God, and made new creatures in Jesus Christ. We thank you in his name, Amen.

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Alive to Live

by Ray C. Stedman

In the second chapter of Ephesians, we are examining the great facts the Apostle Paul sets forth for us which explain who we are in Jesus Christ. Any psychologist will tell you that the basic solution to any mental problem is one of identity. The basic crisis of our day is an identity crisis. If we are going to solve the problems of our lives, we must know who we are. So the apostle is very careful to set forth exactly who we are in Christ. One of the worst struggles most of us have with our Christian faith is that we try to work out our problems without beginning at this foundation, without realizing who we are in Jesus Christ.

We have already seen, in previous studies, the depths of depravity and darkness from which the Lord Jesus lifts us – the human dilemma, the condition of fallen man, which would be utterly without any prospect of change for the better were it not for the grace of God operating in our lives. Then we saw, beginning in Verse 4, the fantastic change which was introduced by the words “But God...” And there is where we want to start again:

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. {Eph 2:4-7 RSV}

You will notice that, when he is talking about who we are as Christians, the apostle makes it very clear that he is tracing through an exact parallel of the experience of the Lord himself. He identifies us

with what Jesus has gone through. We died with him, we learn in Romans 6. Now we are made alive together with him. We are “raised up with him, and made to sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.” These are symbols that the apostle is employing. This beautiful hyperbole is designed to teach us something about ourselves and who we are as Christians. It is necessary, therefore, that we understand what these symbols actually mean in terms of our experience. Otherwise we will have no basis from which to handle the problems life can throw at us.

1. In our last study we tried to see what it meant to be alive in Christ, to be made alive together with him:

First of all, it means that we are no longer dead, that the condition into which we were born has been changed: We are no longer alienated and afraid of God. One of the very first marks of the change which occurs when a person comes to Jesus Christ is right at this point. He is no longer afraid of death. He is no longer afraid to confront God, to come before his presence. God is not seen any longer as his enemy, as a terrible judge, an avenger. Rather, he is seen as a friend, as a father, with a father’s love, a father’s arms, and a father’s heart.

Further, we saw that this means we are joined to Christ. Somehow we have been identified with him. His life has become our life, and our new identity is Christ. He is our life. “He that is joined to the Lord is one spirit,” {cf, 1 Cor 6:17}. So from then on we must never think of ourselves as what we once were in Adam. No longer are we that. We are in

Christ. We belong to him. He has welded himself to us so that an unbreakable union has been established, and we are his and he is ours. “You in me and I in you” {John 14:20b RSV} – these are his own words. Nothing can break this relationship.

This means, of course, that we are changed right to the very depths of our being. Something happened to us when we came to Jesus Christ which alters everything we are from that moment on. We are absolutely different. We are changed at the very root-level of our life. Fundamentally and foundationally, something has come in which has altered what we are, and it will begin to manifest itself from then on, and in many ways – a different outlook, different attitudes, a different approach to situations. It can create rather startling and dramatic changes right away.

Not long ago we received a package in the mail here at the church. We opened it, and to our amazement and bewilderment we found that it was a package of birth control pills. Who would send birth control pills to a church? We opened the card which came with the package and read:

Dear PBC:

The prescription for these pills dates to October. They are still good. Use them if you like. I no longer need them, as I am reformed, though not married. Praise the Lord! He is holding me up.

It was signed “The little toe of the Body.” We didn’t ask for that, didn’t know it was coming. But there is a sign of a basic change in a person because she was made alive in Jesus Christ.

Beginning at that point, we want to go on and see what happens as this new life begins to work itself out in terms of our experience. The apostle adds two other factors which are fundamental to this new relationship we have in Christ:

- We are raised up with him, and
- Made to sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

2. Again, this is following the parallel of what happened to Jesus. What happened to him is what happened to us. What happened to him? He died. And when they took his body down from the cross, it gave every evidence, it had all the marks, of death. Rigor mortis had set in. It was cold and stiff. A painting I once saw of the Descent from the Cross showed in stark and grisly detail the terrible fact of the death of Jesus. The mouth was open, the teeth were protruding, the eyes were glazed. It was obvious that this was a dead body. And that dead body was laid in the tomb. You remember how the utter, stark reality of that death cast a pall of gloom over the apostles. It dashed their hopes and was the end of all their dreams. The Lord was dead. But, on the third morning, God the Father infused into that dead body new life, and Jesus was made alive.

“And that,” says the Apostle Paul, “is an exact parallel to what happened to us when we were made alive in Christ. Into the death of our fallen humanity there came a new life, and new Spirit.” Of course, the body of Jesus was not left alive in the tomb. This is the next point the apostle makes. He didn’t remain there holding counseling sessions with people who came to visit him. No – he was raised up and put back into business. He was put back into life to operate once again, but on a different basis, with a different power. He was thrust back into the experiences of men, but with an entirely different basis upon which to reckon and to live. This is what the apostle says happened to us when we were made alive in Christ. So it is important for us to see this. We are called to go back into the same circumstances, into the same situation, but to reckon on a new power, to demonstrate a new power upon which to draw – resurrection life.

And this means that the Christian then is able to do what he never could do by himself. He is able to act in a way which is impossible to those who are without Jesus Christ. For example, he is able to love the unlovable, to endure the unendurable, to achieve the unachievable, and to forgive the unforgivable.

I don’t need to go outside the PBC congregation to illustrate this. There are those who have given every evidence, after they became

Christians, of being able to love those who were absolutely unlovable to them before.

Many a husband has told me that he had reached such a state of estrangement in his marriage that he literally hated his wife, couldn't stand the sight of her, couldn't abide her presence. But after he became a Christian a new relationship was born. He was able, despite struggles, to begin to look at his wife in a new way, and actually begin to love her. Many wives have said the same thing about their husbands.

Young people have told me how they hated their parents, had come to the place where they couldn't stand them a moment longer – everything their parents did turned them off. They regarded them as nothing but rivals and obstacles to everything they wanted to do. But after coming to Christ, they found it possible to come to a new sense of appreciation and understanding, and love for their parents began to bloom again. With pity and compassion they saw them as people like themselves, struggling with difficult problems they too were unable to handle. All this was possible because they were raised up and set back into life again, to handle the same problems, but with a different outlook.

Some here have learned to endure the unendurable. Not long ago I shared with you the experience of a woman in this congregation who has learned to struggle against unending pain, and yet to find in the midst of it a joy she cannot explain – joy in the midst of increasing pain. Another woman in this congregation has for thirteen years been unable to move about normally. She has gone through terrible struggles with depression, discouragement, and defeat. But the Lord has sustained her and kept her through this time. Gradually she has been able to come to a place of rest and contentment. And, although she has been close to it, she has never taken the way out which her mind suggested to her from time to time – a bottle of pills, or some other method of suicide. She has been able to endure because of the power released in her by a risen Lord.

There are some who have been able to achieve the unachievable. I rejoiced in talking to Paul Winslow not long ago about the Job Therapy program. He was reporting what had

been accomplished in California prisons by means of this. In certain prisons, when they first went in, the wardens were very suspicious and didn't feel it would ever accomplish anything. But as they explained that it was a means by which prisoners could be put in touch with Christian families who would visit them, make friends with them, and be available to meet whatever needs they might have when they got out, the wardens were willing to give it a chance. And Paul was telling me that recently some of these wardens have testified that the program has begun to change the atmosphere in their prisons. Perhaps you do not realize that many of the prisons in this country are in a condition almost as dire as that which produced the Attica revolt in New York state – seething with revolt and discontent, and ready to erupt in violence at any moment. But a new hope has begun to spread. "Salt" has been introduced. And change for the better is beginning. This is the power of a resurrected Lord. This is what "raised up with him" means – to come to life again with a new approach and a new power.

It means the ability to forgive the unforgivable. This weekend John Fischer is in Southern California visiting a Christian college. A few years ago he sang in the chapel of this college. With his guitar he sang some of the songs he has written which we know so well. Afterward, one of the professors of the school wrote a letter to the school paper attacking him very sarcastically, bitterly, and scurrilously – called it "musical garbage," said it was worthless. When John read the paper he was upset and angry. He was tempted to write this man off as obviously having no musical judgment whatsoever, and to feel resentful toward him for taking such a position. But then the Lord began to speak to him, said, "It isn't right for you to feel that way. This man shared how he felt in all honesty. You may not agree with him, but nevertheless you have no right to be resentful toward him." So John determined to take a Christian approach. The next time he was in the area he looked this man up and took him out to dinner. They sat down together in a rather strained atmosphere, at first, as you can imagine. The man didn't know what John wanted. But John asked him something about

his background, and it wasn't very long before they found a mutual interest and began to explore it. This led to other topics. The upshot was that after two hours they felt as close to one another as though they were brothers. They enjoyed a wonderful time together, and the subject of the letter never once came up. They simply appreciated each other. Later on this man heard that John was giving a concert some distance away. To John's surprise he showed up and listened to him play. He came to him afterward and told him how much his son appreciated John's music! The healing had started, you see.

That is the power of resurrection life. It is for situations like that. It is designed to confound the calculations of men, to transform the demoralized, and not to solve, but to dissolve the problems of life. Resurrection power works differently. It means that we come at life with a different attitude which often baffles and bewilders people. They can't figure it out, but recognize that it does wonderful things. That is what it is for. That is what it means to be raised up together with him.

3. The third factor involved in our basic relationship with Christ – part of our true identity – is not only that we have been made alive and raised up with him, but **we have been made to sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus**. What does that mean? Well, several places in Scripture, Christ is said to have been raised up and made to sit at the right hand of God. In the first chapter of Hebrews, the writer says that no angel can ever compare with Christ because, as he puts it,

**But to what angel has he ever said,
“Sit at my right hand,
till I make thy enemies
a stool for thy feet?” {Heb 1:13 RSV}**

In the tenth chapter of the same book there is another reference:

But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, then to wait until his enemies should be made a stool for his feet. {Heb 10:12-13 RSV}

Why is Christ said to have “sat down” when he came to the right hand of the Father after his ascension? Well, it doesn't mean that he sits up there somewhere in a chair, waiting. It is obviously a picture, a symbol of something. Well, of what? What does sitting symbolize? It symbolizes cessation of effort, doesn't it? Sitting means the end of work and of strain. It is a beautiful picture of what the Scriptures call “rest.” We often sing:

Jesus, I am resting, resting
In the joy of what Thou art;
I am finding out the greatness
Of Thy loving heart.

It means dependence upon the work of another. If you were working away digging a hole – sweating and straining and tired and exhausted – and I came along and said, “Look, why don't you rest? I'll take over,” what would you expect me to do? Would you expect me to exhort you to try harder, get a sharper shovel, dig deeper? No. If I meant what I said, I would want you to get out of the hole and let me take the shovel while you sat down and relaxed. I would do the work. And this is the picture drawn for us of what a Christian is to do. He is to live as seated with Christ in the heavenlies. The heavenlies, of course, is not some far-distant spot in space where heaven is. It is the invisible realm of reality – the inner life, the place where we feel tension and pressure and anxiety and hostility. We are to rest there. Having done what Jesus asks us to do, we are to sit down and rest, relax, and let him bear the pressure and the problems.

It is amazing how difficult this is for Christians to grasp.

This past week I have been with a very successful businessman who is a Christian. But he has never been taught very much in this realm. He has naturally applied much of his business practice to his Christian life, and much of it can be applied. He has learned the necessity of planning goals and of moving toward them with smooth organization, thus bringing about the desired results. But he confessed himself to be utterly baffled by the way we operate around here. He said he was fascinated but mystified, because it looks as if we

are so loose, and yet it is amazing how everything works out. He said, "I have been counting the mistakes you made. And every one of those mistakes was the turning point to produce the good results which followed. I can't understand it!" He is learning the great fact that it isn't up to us to maneuver and manipulate to obtain the proper results. We are dealing with a God who has announced that he has ways of working which go beyond what we are able to do. He has told us that he is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we can ask or think. So it is no good trying to sit down and reason out what he is going to do, because you can't ask or think what it is. He has announced through Isaiah:

**For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, ...
For as the heavens are higher than the
earth,
so are my ways higher than your
ways,
and my thoughts than your thoughts.
{cf, Isa 55:8-9 RSV}**

We have to cry out with Paul,

**Oh, the depths of the riches both of
the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are his judgments,
and his ways past finding out! {cf, Rom
11:33}**

Do you see what this does to life? It turns it into an adventure, doesn't it? You never know what any situation is going to result in. A creative God, beginning to work in the most ordinary circumstances, can suddenly make them break wide open, and you have something on your hands which staggers you, which you never dreamed could happen, and which even alarms you, so vast are its possibilities. This is the kind of God we have, and this is what it means to sit – to expect him to do this, and to rest, and not be anxious and struggling and straining and striving and frantic.

There is one other factor involved in rest. Those verses in Hebrews tell us that, when he sat down at the right hand of the Father, our Lord was waiting for something. What? Well, "till his enemies were made his footstool" –

waiting until God the Father, working with the principles involved in the cross and the resurrection, shall produce harmony and peace once again in creation, and every force opposed to the authority of Jesus Christ shall be subdued, and every knee shall bow and confess that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. In other words, an absolutely certain result.

Now, it won't come quickly, and that is our problem. But what this figure of sitting involves is the expectation of a certain result, yet one we must wait for, with patience.

Here is where we struggle, isn't it? Perhaps the most difficult struggle in the Christian life is with the slowness of God. Have you found that out? How absolutely incredibly slow he is at times!

Do you get as impatient with him as I do? Why, there are times when I can see as clear as daylight how he ought to act! I can outline the steps for him – and I do! I tell him just what to do. And it would all work out if he would just take those steps. But he utterly ignores me and goes on doing nothing until I want to rise up and say, "Look, you've got to get off your throne and do something!" I struggle at this point. But God goes ahead, and, before I know it, what I had hoped – and more than I'd ever hoped – has happened. And I don't even know how it came about, at times. Some things I am still waiting for.

But this is the point. The Lord tells us that his work is like a farmer going out to sow his seed. The farmer scatters his seed, and then what? Jesus says he goes home and goes to bed – rests, just relaxes and lets the seed grow, because that is the nature of seed. The farmer knows that if he sows the seed and lets it rest – it must go through a certain process involving time; no seed merely drops into the ground and springs up suddenly; no, you must allow it to decay, to deteriorate, to fall apart, and then out of that comes a new life – it will grow slowly and steadily into the air until finally the whole plant is before you. God announces that this is his way of working. And he urges us to understand that the result is certain, and that we can rest patiently, knowing that he is working out his purposes. We are seated with him in the heavenly places.

I would like to make three concluding observations:

- First, this is true Christianity. Anything else is a fraud and a sham. Any effort to try to be “religious” or “Christian” which doesn’t stem from this threefold relationship of being made alive in Christ, raised with new power, and put back into life to rest in his activity and the certainty of his accomplishing his work, is a basic counterfeit of the Christian life. It is “godliness” without God, “Christianity” without Christ, “spirituality” without the Spirit. And it can never accomplish anything except to turn people away. What Paul has outlined for us here, and this alone, is true Christianity. Anything else is wrong.
- Second, these three great facts are already true of every regenerated Christian. They aren’t something you try to make true – they are already true. They are not something which is going to happen when you are further advanced and have another great experience with God, when you “speak with tongues” or something like that. They are already true. There is nothing more you can add. They are not something which needs to be augmented. They are the ultimate. There is no further you can go. And they have already happened. Now, they may not be your experience yet, because of two factors:
 - ◆ First, ignorance. You might not have begun to experience this because you were unaware of this relationship. Most of us don’t have much understanding of it. We don’t approach our problems this way. So we need to know more about it.
 - ◆ And, second, it may not be true in your experience because you love the pleasures the flesh can give you more than those of the Spirit. We all love the twisted, perverted pleasure of acting in the flesh, in the old way – the self-effort, the self-pleasing, self-indulgent life. We love that. So we choose it at times. But when we do, we ought to remember that we have not lost this threefold relationship. We can always return to it. It is not something tempo-

rary. It is a permanent fixture in our lives. And when we acknowledge the evil – the flesh to which we have submitted – we can return to this relationship.

- The third observation is: We discover that this relationship becomes observable and actual by faith, i.e., by actually living and acting on this basis, by trusting these facts as true and acting accordingly. That is faith. It means that we must employ them in the actual conditions of life. This is no mere armchair theology. There are no easy choices here. We are called on to obey these facts when the flesh within us is screaming for revenge, or when the heart faints with discouragement and despair and we are ready to give up, or when the temptation to be lustful or bitter or sarcastic sweeps over us in waves and we can only claim this relationship for moments at a time and must renew it again and again until at last we enter into some degree of calm and quiet.

It is a battle, but it is possible to win. Each time, we are to remind ourselves, “I am alive in Christ. I am not the same person. I am no longer what I once was. I may not be what I ought to be, but thank God I am not what I was! I am alive in Christ and I am raised with him. I have a new power at my disposal – the power of his life in me. Therefore I can rest. I can step out and say and do the right thing, and expect him to accomplish the results. I can relax. I don’t have to strain. I can leave the problem of solving the difficult situations in his hands, and I will wait for the ultimate and certain result.”

When I do this, I have learned to let God be God in me. This is the way God works. This is the way the life of God is released in the human situation. What a tremendous basis for living! This is our identity from now on. It is who you are. Start every day on this basis, and meet every situation on this basis.

I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. {cf, Gal 2:20 KJV}

Prayer:

Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for this marvelous picture which is true of us; just as certainly as you see life as it really

is, so this is true of us. We pray that you will enable us to grasp it, to understand it, and to begin to handle the problems now before us in the light of this basis of living. We pray in Christ's name, Amen.

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On Display

by Ray C. Stedman

In Paul's great letter to the Ephesians, we are attempting to understand the underlying realities of life and of faith. In the opening words of the second chapter we looked at the condition which lies behind all the difficulties and problems we have in life the state into which mankind has fallen, and how desperately hopeless it is apart from the redeeming work of Jesus Christ.

This is election week, and once again we are hearing all the promises of the political parties, each one saying it is the ultimate hope for redemption here in the United States, and that if we but elect the right candidate, we can count on having all our economic problems solved, all our international conflicts resolved, all our taxes lowered, etc. Yet, we've heard all this many, many times. By experience we know that though it is right to examine the issues, though there are differences between candidates, and though it is perfectly proper and important for us to vote, nevertheless, no political party is going to solve the problems. They are going to be with us yet, because the condition is deeper than politics.

Then we looked at what happens when a man or woman turns to Jesus Christ, the new condition which is introduced – absolutely, fundamentally different, and described for us in these terms: "... even when we were dead through our trespasses, [God] made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus," {Eph 2:5-6 RSV}. We tried to grasp what that means and how essential it is to approach life on that basis.

Now, beginning with Verse 7, we look beyond our present experience to the future which lies ahead of us. The apostle says that God has done all this,

that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God – not because of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. {Eph 2:7-10 RSV}

Immediately Paul explores **the purpose of God in redeeming mankind.**

Why does he come into our lives? Why does he change the fundamental basis of our experience? Why is it that he has raised us up with Christ and made us sit together with him in heavenly places? Well, his answer is that in the coming ages he might display the immeasurable riches of his grace through his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. In other words, God's purpose in doing all this is that he might have a display case in which his own grace – the glory of his character and being – can become evident.

Yesterday my family and I went to the De Young Museum in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park. Along with many other citizens of this area, we visited the Norman Rockwell exhibit of paintings. It was a delightful experience. I have long enjoyed his paintings – especially when they appeared on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* for so many years. Many of the originals of those *Post* covers were in this exhibit. It was a rich slice of Americana spread before us. Each of those paintings is an exhibition of the skill of the artist and of his ability to capture some passing mood, some look, some situation which would evoke either humor or a sense of nostalgia. I stood before one picture and laughed out loud, it was so funny. Another almost brought me to tears. It was a vivid

display of the ability of the artist to contribute richly to the enjoyment of all who viewed his pictures.

This is exactly the thought the apostle has in mind here. God is going to put us on display, he says. Each one of us will be a vivid demonstration of the grace and the perfection of God's character. The glory of his Person will be visible in us throughout the coming ages – especially as it is manifested, says Paul, by his kindness toward us. This is what will make it stand out and be so meaningful to other people – the evidence of the kindness of God toward us.

If you want to know more of what this kindness consists of, you need only take a concordance and trace this word through the Scriptures. You will find, for instance, that it is used to refer to the goodness of God to us as reflected in natural life. The fourteenth chapter of the book of Acts records that the Apostle Paul and his companion Barnabas preached to the people in Lystra. Among other things, Paul said these words:

In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways; yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good and gave you from heaven rains and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness. {Acts 14:16-17 RSV}

Before long it will be Thanksgiving. I hope every family, and each individual, stops and gives thanks to God for his goodness in nature, for the abundance of supply given to us in this richly favored land of ours. It is right that we should, because this is a mark of God's kindness toward us. Paul argues further along this line in the second chapter of Romans. He says to the pagan world, "Do you presume upon the riches of his [God's] kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not know that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?" {Rom 2:4 RSV}. That is, it is designed to make you think about the God who loves you enough to supply your needs and to fill your life with richness of food and shelter and clothing and all the other things God has given us. Do you stop to think about where all this comes from, and who it is that gives it to you? This is beautifully reflected in the spirit of that first Thanksgiving, when the Pilgrim fathers stopped to give thanks. Even in the midst of poverty, distress, and threats

to their very lives, they gave thanks that God had abundantly blessed them.

But this kindness isn't confined to natural blessings; it is also redemptive. This same word appears in the letter to Titus, where Paul says, "After the kindness and love of God, our Savior, toward man appeared, he saved us ... by the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit," {cf, Tit 3:4-5 RSV}. All this is meant to set forth for us the way God works in our lives.

Do you ever stop to think about these things – beyond Thanksgiving Day, that is?

Do you wake up every morning to give thanks for the food, the clothing, the shelter, and all the other things God has given to you?

According to the apostle all this has just begun – God has just started to give. He has not yet poured it out upon us to the full degree by any means. His program, Paul says, is to manifest in abundance the riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through the coming ages. If you read a passage like that without stopping to think a little bit, you'll miss the full impact of this truth. You ought to ponder what that means. How long is an age? Well, according to the Scriptures, there have been only two ages in the history of man, so far. One was the age from Adam to the Flood of Noah. The other is the age from the Flood to the present day. It will end at the coming again of the Lord Jesus, when another age will begin. But according to this passage in Ephesians, God has in mind many ages yet to come. You'll notice that the word is in the plural: "in the coming ages." How long will that be? Well, who can say what is in the heart and mind of God? But what the passage does declare to us is that God has in mind far more extensive possibilities in the future than anything we have ever dreamed of before.

We have already tasted only a mere "trickle" of his grace, yet it is so rich and abundant that it blows all the fuses of our understanding when it begins to dawn on us what we already have. And here Paul says it will increase on and on into the future, that in the coming ages God might demonstrate his kindness. I hope this helps you to grasp something of the majestic greatness of the God with whom we have to do, the God who has already so richly blessed our lives. If you have experienced anything of what it means to be made alive in Christ, to be raised up with him, you know how

rich your life has become already. But that is just the beginning. It is to go on into the coming ages.

This is true not only of his redemptive kindness, but of his natural kindness as well. It always “blows my mind” when I begin to think about this. It is so fantastic in its possibilities that Scripture gives us no more than the briefest hints about it, lest we become so caught up with this that it is all we will think about. But there are certain passages in the Scriptures which hint about some of the possibilities ahead for us in the realm of nature, in the world of physical experience – references to the new heavens and new earth, to a resurrected body, equipped to meet the demands of the human spirit in ways such as we have never known or dreamed of before. Certain passages scattered here and there seem to set this forth for us, to tantalize us with the great possibilities that lie ahead in Jesus Christ.

I have always been interested in astronomy, and I’m fascinated to read about the enormous telescopes like those near here on Mt. Hamilton, or on Palomar Mountain in Southern California. They are stuck right in the front window of the Father’s house! When I look into the heavens and think of the vast reaches of the universe, the innumerable whirling galaxies that float out there in space, it is inconceivable to me that God would create this far-flung universe, using an amount of material inconceivable in its immensity, without the purpose of developing it further. The Scriptures certainly suggest that, in the coming ages, we who have found Jesus Christ and are learning how to operate according to ways God himself is teaching us – learning how to walk and live by faith and to operate by dependence upon his life – shall have set before us fantastic possibilities of development. We may conquer worlds perhaps already occupied – who knows? (I believe the Scriptures indicate that there are other beings in the universe.) Paul does not detail them for us here, but he hints that God has some immense possibilities for us. In these coming ages, age upon age, there will be tremendous work to do, and tremendous equipment with which to do it. God will constantly be increasing the display in us of his kindness.

I must leave it there, but I suggest that this concept merits considerable study.

One thing this passage does make clear – it reveals in proper perspective the puniness of our present experience. If your thinking is bounded only

by the womb and the tomb, what a brief span of life you are engaged in, what piddling possibilities you are concerned with! God has far greater prospects ahead, and the believer is to lift his eyes from this present experience. Our present life might not always be what we’d like it to be. In fact, we are guaranteed that it won’t be. But it is merely the beginning, the start toward immeasurable possibilities which lie beyond. Robert Browning’s little rhyme takes on new meaning in light of a passage like this. He says,

Grow old along with me,
The best is yet to be
The last of life for
Which the first was made.

We are learning now, in this age, in order that we might be prepared to display the greatness of God’s glory in the coming ages.

Next Paul brings **the basis for all this** before us again. He never lets us forget why and how this can be:

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God – not because of works, lest any man should boast. {Eph 2:8-9 RSV}

This is what makes it all possible. Just think of it! It has already been done. Notice the tense of the verb: “you have been saved.” This refers back to the three-fold relationship set forth previously in this series:

- We have been made alive in Christ.
- We have been given a new identity.
- We are no longer what we once were.
- We are no longer associated with Adam; we are in Christ, and Christ is our life.
- We face every day, every moment, no longer as a child of a fallen condition, but as a son of the living God.

I cannot stress enough how important that is to remember! It will make all the difference in the

world as to whether you approach life feeling inadequate, guilty, rejected, and lonely, or whether you are filled with confidence, certainty, acceptance, love and warmth. It will make all the difference in the world as to how you begin each day, and how you think of yourself before God. This is of such vital importance because the truth is, as psychologists tell us, that if you don't see yourself as a worthwhile person, accepted before God and of great importance to him, then you can not see anyone else that way. You will begin to demand performance of others in order to accept them. You will not be able to forgive others. You will be caught up in a web of perfectionism in which you are constantly feeling guilty yourself – because you don't live up to your own ideals.

What delivers you from that are tremendous facts set forth here? We have a new identity in Jesus Christ, a new power. We are raised up together with him. His power is available to us in the simplicity of the ordinary circumstances of our lives. God himself is present, and is releasing through us – in ways we can not feel but nevertheless are true – his life, a touch of heaven upon our earthly condition. And we can enter into a new attitude. We are made to sit together with him in heavenly places in Christ. That is, we are to rest in him, to relax and let him carry the load, and to be freed from strain, anxiety, and fear of what the outcome will be. It is his responsibility to work it out.

If you are thinking of these facts as mere theological doctrines, how far astray you have gone! These are realities which make the difference as to how life is lived, what your days are like, and what your tomorrows will be. The basis, Paul reminds us, is all there; it has all been accomplished. The whole of your future development, not only in this age but in the ages to come, rests upon a foundation which already has been laid. God is not going to add another thing to it. He does not need to do another thing for you beyond what he has already done. He will simply help you to work out your life, day by day, on the basis of understanding what has already happened.

This saves you from the silly running around after every new theological fad that comes along, every new book that comes out, every new tape that is issued, every new program that comes along, and thinking you need to have some vast new experience which will change your whole life. No, no. You need only grasp and understand more fully,

and then put into practice, the riches of God's grace already provided for you in Jesus Christ. All the advance of your spiritual life rests upon that.

Notice that Paul stresses the fact that you had nothing to do with this. You and I did not add to this at all. This is God's activity. We didn't originate it; it is not our own doing. We couldn't have come up with this redemptive program by which, in a very real sense, we have died. Man never plans to die; he plans to live. Death is what he fears most. Yet God has worked out a way by which our old life can end, can die, can be put aside. We never could have thought that up. But God did. So it is not of our doing. And it is not of our deserving. We have no merit here. It is not of works, Paul says. We cannot earn it. It is all of grace. It is given to us, day by day, from the hand of God.

This is in order that man may never boast. Do you know what boasting is? It is deceiving yourself. Boasting is pretending you are something you are not. When you boast you are saying, "I'm my own creator, my own god. I have in myself what it takes to handle life. Nobody contributes to me. I am sufficient in myself." That is what we really mean when we boast. But this is a lie, because we are not self-sufficient. Each one of us is a dependent creature. We cannot live a moment without somebody else's love, without somebody else's acceptance, somebody else's understanding. Life turns dull and bleak and barren and gray and drab without the relationships we have with others. When we forget we are dependent creatures, lie to ourselves about it, and boast about what we have done and how much we have been able to accomplish, we are only deceiving ourselves.

God never allows self-deception to stand. God is an utter realist. He deals with life exactly as it is. So he says that all you and I can contribute is to receive his grace, simply take it, moment by moment accept relationship with him, utilize the power he makes available to us, and rest in the fantastic fact that he will solve all the riddles which arise, so as to accomplish the ends he has promised.

Boasting in your faith would be like boasting in the fact that you reached out to take a check from somebody. Suppose you have a tremendous debt but someone offers to pay it for you, writes out a check for you for \$500,000. And you reach out and take it from him. How absurd it would be if you then went around saying to everybody, "Isn't it wonderful that I had what it took to reach out and

grab that check?" They might say to you, "Wasn't it marvelous that he paid that debt for you?" If you said, "Oh, he didn't do anything much; I took the check. After all, if I hadn't taken it, what good would it have done for him to give it in the first place?" – if you directed all the attention and solicited all the praise and glory for the hand that reached out to take the check – how silly that would be! It is the resources of God which make all this possible. It is the greatness of God which supplies this richness of grace to our lives.

So the apostle goes on now to show us **its ultimate manifestation:**

We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.
{Eph 2:10 RSV}

Notice how careful he is to put "works" in the right place. You don't obtain anything from God by working for it. You never deserve anything but judgment at his hand. If he gave us what we deserve, we would all end up in Hell. No. We receive his grace, his mercy, his love. But this results in good works. That is the point. It is designed to produce good works. It is a marvelous manifestation of God's ability.

The word translated "workmanship" is really the word *poem*. "We are his poem." Or, if you like, perhaps it would be better rendered, "We are his masterpiece." God is working out in our lives a tremendous exhibition and demonstration of his wisdom, his power, his love, his life, his character, his peace, and his joy. He is teaching us, training us, bringing us along, applying the paint in exactly the right places, producing a marvelous masterpiece to be put on display. This is to result in good works: kindness, love, mercy, compassion, help to one another, meeting one another's needs.

Paul says that God has prepared these works beforehand. I experienced an interesting illustration of this in Albuquerque last week. Brian Burgess, one of our interns, went there with me. We decided, as the plane was coming in for the landing, that we would have some prayer together there on the plane. I hadn't talked to Brian about this passage at all, but I was struck by the way he prayed. He said,

"Father, thank you for the good works already prepared for us in Albuquerque, for the fact

that they are waiting for us to step into them and experience them."

This is exactly what this passage is saying. God has already prepared some works for you to do. As you walk in the Spirit, he will lead you to them. When you enter into them they will always be works of blessing, of help, of strengthening toward others.

Sure enough, after we got to Albuquerque these began to unfold:

- There was a missionary there from the Amazon region of South America who was discouraged and terribly upset, ready to quit the ministry. Through the ministry we had there he came alive and began to see again what God could do. He came to us with a light on his face and said, "I'm going back to my field completely revolutionized in my approach. Now I've learned how God operates."
- A girl came to see me because she was in conflict with her parents. She did not know how to handle it. We looked together at the Scriptures and it began to unfold for her. She went home and talked with her parents, and the next day she said, "Oh, things are so much better now because I could approach them this new way!"
- One morning, Brian had a Bible study with the wealthy businessman at whose home we were staying. It was a joy to hear him teach this man. Executive, prominent businessman that he was, he sat as a little child at Brian's feet and learned how to study the Bible. His whole life was enriched by that experience!
- A young pastor was facing dissension in his church. He wanted some counsel on how to handle it. God enabled the Scriptures to speak to that situation and give him wisdom and guidance for it.

All these good works had been prepared beforehand. All we did was step into them.

Do you have any idea how many good works God has prepared for you? They are waiting for you to enter into, as you walk in faith and trust and dependence upon Christ. They are entered by faith, by trust in the God who has raised us with Christ

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and made us to sit together with him. The situations are there, ready and waiting for you to step into. This is what God has called you to. As you do so, you become a vivid display of the greatness and the glory of God.

Let these thoughts rest in your heart and mind.

Give thanks to God for what he has done in Jesus Christ, and for the fact that this opens to us fantastic possibilities which stretch from this moment on beyond death into the coming ages, age following upon age, incredible numbers of possibilities for the manifestation of the greatness of our God.

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Strangers in Darkness

by Ray C. Stedman

In the second chapter of Ephesians, we are looking together with the Apostle Paul at mighty truths, fantastic statements, which make us aware of what it means to be a Christian. If we ever really grasp what it means to be a Christian, we will never again be envious of anyone who is not a Christian, will never wish we were back in the world, nor in any way be drawn toward its outlook or its pattern of life.

Of course, we learn to appreciate what has happened to us by looking back to what we were, and really beginning to understand what God called us out of in Christ. The opening words of this chapter tell us that we once were dead in trespasses and sins; we once walked according to the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the god of darkness; and we behaved according to the lusts of our flesh. We did what we thought was right, but found it was constantly getting us into difficulty and destroying our humanity – and we never knew why. We were victimized by the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature, as Paul says, “children of wrath,” i.e., suffering the degeneration of humanity, “like the rest of mankind.”

And then, out of all this, Christ called us. Those of us who have believed in Jesus Christ have been made alive together with him. What a fantastic statement that is! A resurrection has occurred; we have become new creatures, a new creation, different than anything we ever were before. And we’ve been given a new power. We’ve been raised up with him, so that the power upon which we are to operate is not the power of a determined will, but the power of a trusting heart, reckoning upon resurrection life. And then we’ve been made to sit with him in heavenly places. We have been given a new attitude, have been delivered from striving, from

pressure, and have been allowed to rest, to relax, to be confident that God is working out his purposes in our lives. All of this conveys to us some sense of what it means to be a Christian.

In Verse 11 of Chapter 2, the apostle takes up another view of our past life. He looks back upon what we were as pagans – “Gentiles” is the word he uses – and reminds us of our previous condition of ignorance. You see, not only were we dead, helpless, but we were also in darkness, in ignorance, apart from Jesus Christ.

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands – remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ. {Eph 2:11-13 RSV}

In this passage the apostle is dealing with the difference between the Jews and the Gentiles. He identifies the Gentiles for us. He says they are the ones who are called “uncircumcised” by those who are circumcised, i.e., by Jewish people. He indicates the distinguishing mark of the Jews, and he has a good reason for doing so. He says, “You Gentiles are uncircumcised. The Jews are the circumcised people.” In being circumcised they were recognizing the fact that they were a special people, belonging to God in a unique sense. The mark of circumcision was what indicated this distinction. So when Paul said the Jews were circumcised, he was symbolizing by that fact the advantages the

Jew had over the Gentile. We will see what those are in a moment. But he was also highlighting the fact that the Gentiles, the pagans, did not have these advantages.

Circumcision is made a great deal of in the Scriptures. It is referred to all through the Old Testament and the New. It began, you remember, with Abraham, who circumcised his son Isaac at the request of God. And it always indicated that here was a people who had a special access to God, a special relationship to him. The Gentile world was without this. All symbols in Scripture are very significant; they always mean something. Why do you think God chose this sign (for God himself chose it) and placed it upon the male sex organ? Why was this part of the body chosen to be the sign of a privileged people?

The answer, of course, is that we human beings are basically sexual. The Scriptures teach this very plainly. Oftentimes the church has not taught it, but instead has acted as though sex were something extraneous to human beings, as though our bodies ended at the waist and we needed to be concerned about nothing further. But the Scriptures always teach that sex is an integral part of our humanity, that we are basically and fundamentally sexual, not only at the physical level but in the soul and the spirit as well – that there is a soulish form of sex, as there is a spiritual form of sex. The Scriptures teach this very plainly. Therefore circumcision is the recognition on God's part that, being sexual at our core, what we think about sex is a revelation of what we think about ourselves, of our self-image, and that how people act sexually is a dead giveaway of how they see themselves before him – their identity, in other words.

This is why the Gentile, pagan world was called "uncircumcised" – because it was characterized by two things, primarily:

1. First, sexual immorality. The pagans of Paul's day were oftentimes highly educated – what we call *civilized*. But intermixed with all their civilization was terrible sexual degeneracy. When you visit the pagan world, the ancient temples of Rome, of Greece, and other places, invariably you find tremendous emphasis upon sex symbols. The Greek philosophers, who are regarded as such advanced thinkers that in many ways they have never been surpassed, nevertheless were sexually degraded. For ex-

ample, Socrates involved himself in homosexual practices. Homosexuality was widely accepted and very prevalent in those days, along with many other degrading sexual practices. So the pagan world of Paul's day revealed its lack of understanding of its own humanity by its sexual practices.

2. And, second, religious ignorance. They didn't know themselves, because they didn't know God. The Scriptures teach us constantly that you never know yourself until you know God. It is the knowledge of God which reveals man to himself. This is why those who have come into a knowledge of God, and grow in that knowledge, are always at the same time burgeoning in the understanding of man and of themselves. All this is implied in the classification of the pagan world as uncircumcised: sexually aberrant, religiously ignorant.

Yet Paul gives a hint in Verse 11 that the Jews, though they had many advantages, were oftentimes hypocritical. They weren't taking hold of their advantages; they were claiming what they did not actually possess. He puts it this way:

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands – {Eph 2:11 RSV}

The Jews were called *circumcised*, but they didn't always live like circumcised people, as Paul suggests here.

You say, "How does this affect any of us? That was in the 1st century; here we are in the 20th. What does this have to do with us? They may have been pagans back in Paul's day, but we don't live in that kind of world." I hope you have already realized that such is not the case. We do indeed live in that kind of world. Paganism is rampant in our day, and it is exactly the same kind of paganism as Paul had in view. Most of us trace our ancestry to northern Europe. And it is healthy for us to remember that not too many centuries ago our ancestors were wandering through the forests of northern Europe, clad in animal skins, living in caves, and were in no sense civilized as we define it today. Our ancestors were known to the world of

Paul's day as barbarians. And we would have remained barbarians, had it not been for the influx of the gospel through brave missionaries who carried the Word to our forefathers in England and Germany and other places from which our Anglo-Saxon race has descended. It is good to remember that we would never have had what we enjoy in this country today were it not for the fact that the gospel penetrated these areas.

This week we observe Thanksgiving Day. It is good to remember our heritage. Our fathers, who landed on the shores of New England almost 400 years ago, were fleeing religious persecution, they were godly men and women. And we have reaped their heritage. Today many of us have been raised in a Christian environment, having come from Christian homes in a so-called "Christian" nation. We are more in the position of the Jews of Paul's day than that of the Gentiles. We have been exposed to a great deal of truth. We have many advantages, just as the Jews had. They had the potential of knowing God, but many of them did not know him. Many of us are in that condition today.

Yet it is also true that many among us come right out of a pagan environment, such as Paul describes here. So we should look at how he describes this condition, because, it is not only the condition many of us come from, it is also a condition toward which the world is returning as it grows more and more paganized and loses its Christian influence and teaching. Verse 12:

remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. {Eph 2:12 RSV}

That is paganism. And Paul starts at its highest possible level. The one thing which can be said of all pagans, no matter what their background, is that they are "separated from Christ." If you haven't yet come to Christ, you are a pagan. You may have been brought up in a religious home. You may be trained in civilized approaches. You may have been exposed to the philosophies of the world. You may be highly intelligent, very artistic, and in many ways an admirable and enjoyable person. But the one great fact remains: you are separated from Christ. And without Christ you have no life from God. The life of God is not available to

you. You may know that he exists. You may believe in him. There were pagans in Paul's day who did believe in God. They had turned from the empty worship of the gods of the Greek and Roman pantheons, had believed that there was a true God somewhere. But they didn't know him. And that is so true of many today.

So that the highest thing that can be said is this: You are separated from Christ. There is a gap. It may be only a small gap; you may be close to Christ, very close. You may understand and admire his teaching. But until you have come to know him, till you've received him, there is a gap which is a death-gap, and you still remain "dead in trespasses and sins," as Paul states it in the opening verses of this chapter – bound under the course of the prince of this world, fulfilling the lusts of the passions of the flesh, a child of wrath, even as the rest of mankind. That is the highest thing which can be said of a pagan.

But for many it is much worse, as Paul goes on to describe: "alienated from the commonwealth of Israel." An alien is a stranger, a foreigner living in the midst of a country, who does not have the rights of citizenship. A commonwealth is a nation or a kingdom. Here Paul contrasts the position of the Jews with that of the Gentiles. The Jews had a nation over which God ruled. They gloried in the fact that God was the head of their nation. They had a sense of destiny, a sense of God's protection, a sense of belonging to a single people who were all under the oversight of God. They had a camaraderie, a sense of brotherhood which came from belonging to God, from being his people.

But the pagans did not know this. The pagan world worshipped a pantheon of gods. The Greeks had their list of gods, the Romans had theirs, the Persians had another, the barbarians to the north – the Norsemen and others had yet another list. And all of these gods were as irritable and as undependable as men. Pagans lived in a world in which they were exposed to powers they recognized as being greater than themselves, but in which there was no consistency – and never any love. Pagans never thought of God as loving them; pagans never thought of loving God. There is no suggestion of this in their writings at all. They never reached out to God, never felt themselves loved by God. They could only beseech kindness and mercy of their gods, and try to influence them. But there was no sense of belonging to God. The Jews had that

sense; the pagans did not. They were aliens from the commonwealth of Israel.

You know that in time of crisis an alien is always treated differently than a citizen. When war broke out with Japan, people of Japanese ancestry here on the West coast were treated as aliens – even though most of them actually were citizens. They were suspected and interred, and no one wanted anything to do with them for a time, because they had the look of aliens. Immediately, when a crisis breaks out, this line of demarcation is very evident. And Paul recognizes this of pagans. He says, “Since you weren’t part of Israel you didn’t have that sense of belonging to God.”

But it goes further than that: “strangers to the covenants of promise.” These covenants were the promises, the agreements God had made with Abraham and Jacob and Moses and David and others that he would do certain things. He bound himself to obey certain provisions, if man would respond to them. And so every Israelite had a hope, had a way out, if he would take it. They didn’t always do so, but they did have a way, if they wanted it. There were, for instance, the promises which had to do with the sacrifices. Every Israelite knew that if he were burdened with guilt, troubled by having done something wrong, there was something he could do about it: He could bring a sacrifice. God had bound himself that, if an animal were sacrificed under proper conditions, then the conscience of that individual would be eased. And furthermore the priesthood was provided to instruct them what was right and what was wrong, what was harmful and what was harmless. And finally, there were all the promises which had to do with the Messiah. Every Israelite knew that, no matter how bad things got, one day God was going to send a Messiah. And even though the nation forgot God, turned away completely and went off and “did their own thing” like the pagans around them, yet God would not cut them off. He would send a Messiah who, one day, would restore the people again. So the Jew always had the hope of the coming of Messiah.

But not the pagan. This is the contrast. They had no hope in their darkness. They belonged to their unreliable, irritable gods, and there was no certainty these would ever respond to them in any way. So when their spirits were oppressed, and they were filled with guilt and shame, and they fell into the violence, cruelty, and warfare which ob-

essed the pagan world, they had no promise of any help, no place they could turn, no hope in the future whatsoever, but were left strictly to their own devices.

Therefore, Paul goes on, their final condition was: “having no hope, and without God in the world.” Archaeologists have dug up 1st century cemeteries in various places in Greece and Rome and have found many tomb stones which bear upon them the Greek or Latin words for “No hope” – no hope in their darkness, no light. As a consequence, in the Roman world of that day, despair reigned everywhere. If you read the writings of the Roman philosophers and thinkers of that day, you find always a philosophy of despair, of meaningless existence. There was no sense of purpose in life. Even the most hopeful indulged only in a kind of whistling in the dark. They looked out into the future and saw absolutely nothing significant. Their writings reveal the utter darkness, the emptiness, the hopelessness of pagan life.

You can even see this reflected in the Scriptures. Remember the wistful question of Pilate when Jesus stood before him and informed him that he had come into the world to declare the truth. Pilate responded, “What is truth?” There you can read the hopeless cynicism of an educated Roman who had learned to despair of ever finding reality. Remember burning curiosity of the Roman proconsul, Sergius Paulus, of the island of Cyprus, when Paul and Barnabas came there. He heard about these two men, sent for them, and inquired diligently of them what this teaching was regarding Jesus. He was longing to find a way out of the hopelessness of his pagan environment.

The result, of course, is that the pagans were without God, just as Paul says. There was no sense of any presence in the universe greater than man. The Greek thinkers, the scientists of that day, the Roman philosophers, the statesmen, the leaders of the Roman world, all looked out upon the universe and saw nothing but an enormous cosmic loneliness – just as men do today – man alone in a cruel and heartless universe, struggling along, trying to do his best in his feeble way, in his brief day, with nothing lying beyond. Therefore atheism was widespread in the Roman world. We look back and assume they were all worshipping gods. No, the largest proportion of the Romans and the Greeks did not worship gods; they worshipped nothing. They didn’t believe in gods anymore. They went

through the forms of worshipping, just as men do today in many churches, but there was no sense of the presence of God. To them God was dead, just as he is to many in our day. Now that is paganism; it is always that way.

Someone told me this morning about a project called “Cyclops” that some brilliant scientists have devoted themselves to. It involves the expenditure of large sums of money in an effort to explore the universe with telescopes and other means, to see if they can discover a higher level of civilization than we know here, with the hope – the only hope in their darkness – that they might possibly strike upon a civilization which has solved some of the problems we wrestle with, might make contact with it and gain remedies of the insupportable conditions of our day. That is how pagan the world again has become – drifting back into darkness, loneliness, hopelessness, so that men are grasping at straws, trying to find some way out of the abject despair that grips the hearts of people everywhere in the world today.

Think of that, when you think of your Christianity:

- Think of what it is that God has called you out of in Jesus Christ.
- And when you enjoy Thanksgiving Day in your home, with its Christian love and warmth, its hope, its meaningfulness in the midst of life, the gladness and joy of your family, remember what you would have been without Christ, in the darkness of the paganism to which the world is rapidly returning.

Every now and then we are told that this ancient world was a beautiful place. It was filled with great architectural achievements. We visit them as tourists and gaze in awe at the remarkable abilities of the Romans and Greeks and Persians and Mayans and others. Ah, yes. But if we could live back in those times we would see a people gripped with despair, hopeless, experiencing little enjoyment in life at all. And occasionally a travel folder will hold before us the image of some beautiful South Sea island, where happy savages lie around indolently all day playing their ukuleles, with fish ready to be caught right there at the edge of the sea, and coconuts and fruit dropping off the

trees, where there is nothing to do but enjoy life. Such folders try to call us back to the happy, primeval, simple life of these primitive people. They are complete hogwash! There never has been an idyllic society like that, and never will be. Outwardly, superficially – perhaps. But inwardly every one of them were in the grip of fear, hostility, hatred, superstition, emptiness, and religious mockery.

I read an account the other day of a South American Indian who told the missionary who led him to Christ, “When I was living in the jungle, we never knew a day without fear. When we woke up in the morning, we were afraid. When we went out of our houses, we were afraid. When we walked along the river, we were afraid. We saw an evil spirit in every stone and tree and waterfall. And when night fell, fear came into our huts and slept with us all night long.”

That is what paganism is. And this is what the world is returning to. All around us on every side, as Christian truth begins to fade, as the nation becomes secularized and humanized, this pagan darkness settles upon the land once again.

We ought to give thanks for our Puritan fathers and the heritage they’ve left us. But we also ought to ask ourselves, “What are we passing on to the next generation?”

Thank God there has come a degree of spiritual revival. It is wonderfully hopeful to see how young people everywhere, and older ones as well, are rediscovering the great truths of Christian faith. But how thankful it ought to make our hearts this week, above every week, that God has given us these marvelous blessings in Jesus Christ, and has called us out of such darkness!

Paul goes on now to show us what has happened, Verse 13:

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ. {Eph 2:13 RSV}

Without Christian missionaries, without their knowledge of the Scriptures, without the instruction of those who came to know God and then brought the message to us, we would have been nothing but pagans, without any light in our darkness other than the natural light which came from our inner being, indicating that there is a God somewhere. We would be living like that still – probably in

skins in caves in the woods. But now, having once been far off, we have been brought nigh by the blood of Christ, by the death of Christ.

I must point out here that it isn't merely the death of Christ. Paul says that it is the blood of Christ. It is significant that he uses that term. Death, of course, is not always bloody. You can die without losing your blood. The Scriptures sometimes speak of the death of Christ, and more often of the cross of Christ. But still more often they speak of the blood of Christ. Why this emphasis? Many don't like this today. They don't like to think of the cross or of the death of Jesus as being bloody. But God emphasizes it. God wants us to think about it, because blood is always a sign of violence. You see, the death of Jesus was not just a simple passing away – dying of old age on a comfortable bed. No, no. It was a violent death, a bloody, gory, ugly, revolting scene – a man hanging torn and wretched upon a cross, with blood streaming down his sides and running down the cross.

God wants us to remember that violent death, because violence is the ultimate result of paganism. It is the final expression of a godless society. Cruelty arises immediately when love and truth disappear from society. And God is simply reminding us that when humanity had done its worst, had sunk to its lowest, had vented its anger in the utter wretchedness and violence and blood of the cross,

his love reached down to that very place and, utilizing that violent act, began to redeem, to call back those who were far off and bring them near – in the blood of Christ.

And, in the blood of Jesus, all the advantages the Jews had were conferred upon the Gentiles. Ignorant, pagan, darkened, foolish, struggling, hopeless – nevertheless, they had just as much access to God, in the blood of Christ, as any Jew ever had with his temple, his Law, his priesthood, and his sacrifice. By this the apostle is trying to emphasize to us the exceedingly amazing wonder of the grace of God, which laid all these liabilities aside and reached out to us and found us just as we were, and brought us near by the blood of Jesus Christ our Lord. What a gift to give thanks for!

From this point Paul is going to develop some more fantastic truth, to show us more of what it means to be a Christian, brought near by the blood of Christ. He is going to build, step by step and statement by statement, until we climb a tremendous height – it is absolutely incredible that men should ever come to this position, but it is all by the grace and the glory and the love and the power of God.

I don't know what this does to you, but it makes my heart want to rejoice, to give thanks, and to praise God for what he has done in the death of his Son.

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The Prince of Peace

by Ray C. Stedman

In Ephesians 2, we come now to a section in which the Apostle Paul deals with Christ's role as the great peacemaker among men. Here we will see him in fulfillment of that prophecy in Isaiah 9:

**... his name shall be called
"Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."
{Isa 9:6b RSV}**

This title belongs strictly to Jesus.

To some, it may seem that Dr. Kissinger is the prince of peace these days. We are all living in expectation that peace is about to come in Vietnam. Perhaps by Christmas we'll be able to celebrate the end of America's longest war. Have you wondered why it has taken so long to settle this conflict? Many great minds have devoted themselves to trying to end this war, but they have been baffled by it. I remember reading several years ago a statement by Secretary General U Thant of the United Nations, in which he cried out in bafflement and bewilderment as to why the secret of peace in Vietnam seems to elude men. The answer, of course, as expressed by Paul in Romans 3, is that "The way of peace they have not known," {Rom 3:17 KJV}.

Men don't understand what brings conflict and, therefore, what brings peace. We can see this at the individual level, within the family circle, in a church, in a company, in a state, in a nation, and among the nations of the world. It is always the same problem – men do not know the way of peace.

In this very remarkable passage, the apostle gives us the way of peace. He uses as an illustration the fact that Jesus Christ bridged the widest chasm which ever has existed between men – the gulf between the Jew and the Gentile. If you don't think that conflict can claim title to being the most difficult gulf to bridge, I suggest you consider why

it is it has been so difficult to settle the Arab-Israeli problem in the Middle East. The greatest minds of our day have tried to work that out, and no one has gotten anywhere near a settlement. It is because this conflict is extremely difficult to bridge. Paul describes how Christ actually does it. And this is a wonderful picture for us of how peace can be brought in any area of conflict or hostility, whether among individuals or groups or nations. Paul says,

**But now in Christ Jesus you [Gentiles]
who once were far off have been brought
near in the blood of Christ. For he is our
peace, who has made us both one, and has
broken down the dividing wall of hostility,
by abolishing in his flesh the law of com-
mandments and ordinances, that he might
create in himself one new man in place of
the two, so making peace, and might rec-
oncile us both to God in one body through
the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to
an end. And he came and preached peace
to you who were far off and peace to those
who were near; for through him we both
have access in one Spirit to the Father.
{Eph 2:13-18 RSV}**

There are three mentions of the word *peace* in that passage:

- ⇒ "He is our peace," Paul says, speaking of Christ, and
- ⇒ He has made peace (Verse 15: "so making peace"), and,
- ⇒ "He came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near."

In those three occurrences of the word peace, you have the apostle's outline of how Christ makes peace, the way he goes about it. So it is very important that we note these.

- He is our peace – that is the origin of peace.
- Then there is the process of peace, how it is actually brought about – he came and made peace.
- Finally there is the means of laying hold or possessing that peace – he preached peace.

I want to underscore for you the fact that this is not mere doctrine, not mere theology. If you are having a conflict with anybody – whether it is in your home, at your work, in your neighborhood, in the church, or in the world, this is the way of peace. This is the secret of peace. This is the key to peace.

First, **the origin of peace**: “He is our peace, who has made us both one.” Paul starts with a definition of what true peace really is. True peace is oneness. It is not merely the cessation of hostility, the absence of conflict; it means being one. This is very important to know. Otherwise, when you talk about peace, you are only being superficial.

- Is it peace when you get two armies to lay down their weapons and stop fighting each other? Well, we call it that. And certainly it is to be preferred over armed conflict. But it is not really peace – not according to God's definition.
- Is it peace when a husband and wife agree not to get a divorce but to stay together, perhaps for the sake of the children, but that home continues in coldness and divisiveness, with no harmony or joy? Well, it may be peace according to man's definition, but it isn't according to God's.
- Is it peace when two friends who haven't spoken to each other for some time finally decide to agree to disagree, to speak civilly to each

other, but they don't seek each other's company any more? Not according to God's definition.

- When a church maintains its rituals and programs, and yet is filled with division and strife and coldness and festering resentment, is that a peaceful church? No, not according to this definition.

You see, peace is oneness, harmony. It is sharing mutual enjoyment. It is being one. Anything else is superficial and temporary and highly unsatisfactory.

You know this to be true, don't you? You have made peace on superficial terms, and have found it only external. If you merely agree not to fight, it is not peace. And invariably it results, sooner or later, in a new outbreak, with all the previous animosity surging to the surface once again. It is only temporary, and never very satisfying. This is why what we call peace among nations never lasts – because it isn't really peace. It isn't oneness at all. It is only a weariness with warfare, and agreement to stop it for awhile until we can all recuperate and rearm. Then it breaks out all over again, because nothing is ever settled. God isn't interested in that.

But here the apostle tells us the secret of peace. The secret of oneness is a Person: “He is our peace.” And when Christ Jesus makes peace – between individuals or between nations – that peace will be a satisfying, permanent, and genuine peace. It will be a real peace that will last and last. And it will be a totally satisfying experience. What Paul is saying is that in order to live at peace, you must have peace. The problem with most of us is that we want to start by clearing up only the results of conflict. God never starts there; he starts with the person. He says peace is a Person, and in order for you to live at peace with someone else, you must be at peace with the Person of Christ. If you have his peace, then you can start solving the conflict around you. But you never can do it on any other basis. So the place to start, the origin of peace, is the settling of any problems between you and Jesus Christ. That is always the place to start.

Many people come to me, as to any pastor, with various problems involving conflict. Usually they are upset, troubled, discouraged, angry. They report to me at great length all the terrible things the other person has done, and all the reasons why

they are justified in being so angry, and feeling so mistreated. I listen to it all, and then I have to say to them, “Yes, you’ve got a problem. But that isn’t your only problem. You really have two problems. And the one you haven’t mentioned at all is the one you must start with.” Then I have to point out to them that their basic problem is that they don’t have any peace themselves. They are not at peace. They are upset, angry, emotionally distraught. And everything they do and think is colored by that emotional state. They can’t see anything straight, they don’t see things in balance, their perspective is distorted, everything is out of focus. And it is impossible to solve the problem – impossible – until they themselves acquire peace.

But this is the promise of God to Christians: He is our peace. And once their attitude is changed, once their heart is settled, once they have put the matter into the hands of the Lord, and they see that he is active in it, that he has a solution, and their own heart is therefore at peace, then they can begin to understand what is happening and can apply some intelligent remedies to the situation which will work out the problem. There is profound psychological insight in the fact that the apostle begins with the declaration that Christ is our peace. He alone can accomplish it – making us one.

Now look at **the process of peace**. How does it happen? It comes in three stages, Paul says. Three things must happen before you really have oneness. But this is what Christ can do, and this is the way he does it:

- First, he “has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, [the hostility must end first] by abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, ...” That is how he breaks down the wall, as we will see in a moment.
- And, second, “that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace,”
- And, third, “might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end.”

I remind you that Paul is talking about the ending of the great conflict between the Jews and

the Gentiles of his day. He says the first thing Jesus did was to break down the “middle wall of partition,” the “dividing wall of hostility.” Paul is referring to a feature of the temple in Jerusalem. He was a Jew, and had been brought up there. He understood the temple – he had been there many times. And he remembered the wall, about 3’ or 4’ high, which ran through the court of the temple, dividing it into two sections, separating the court of the Gentiles, where the Gentiles were permitted to come, from the inner court, into which only Jews were permitted. There was a sign which warned anyone who wasn’t a Jew that if they dared to venture into this inner court, they did so on pain of death.

In fact, in the year 1871, archaeologists, digging around the temple site in Jerusalem, actually uncovered the very stone marked with this warning. These were the actual words, translated from both the Hebrew and the Greek: “No man of another race is to proceed within the partition and enclosing wall about the sanctuary. Any one arrested there will have himself to blame for the penalty of death which will be imposed as a consequence.”

Now, the wall is a symbol. Actually it was not destroyed until A.D. 70, several years after this letter was written, when the temple itself was destroyed. But Paul says the hostility it represented was demolished in Jesus Christ. At best, the Jews treated the Gentiles with aloofness; at worst, they despised and hated them. There was enormous hostility between these two peoples.

Several years ago I walked along the infamous Berlin Wall. As I walked, I saw the East German guards stationed at intervals. And I could feel all the built-in suspicion and mutual distrust, the hatred and hostility, and the outright defiance represented by that wall. Many people have been killed trying to escape from East Germany. And where their bodies fell, the West Germans have erected crosses upon which they place wreaths as a reminder – in open defiance of the East German guards. You can’t enter the neighborhood of that wall without feeling the intense suspicion and hostility it represents.

There are walls like that among us. There are walls in homes like that. There is hostility and hatred and defiance and suspicion and distrust between husbands and wives, between parents and children, and between neighbors and friends. These walls of hostility arise. They are what most of us

run up against. We feel the hostility, the anger, the deep-seated resentment and bitterness, and we say, “It’s no use; there’s nothing we can do.” But the apostle says that Jesus Christ knows how to remove these walls. How? Well, Paul tells us: “... by abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances.” That is the way. It is the Law which makes the hostility, and if you remove the Law, you’ll end the hostility.

Once again, we are dealing here with a very profound psychological insight. The strength of any hostility is demand. This is what the apostle is saying. What creates hostility? Why, a self-righteous demand upon someone, a demand without any admission of guilt on the part of the one demanding, a one-sided justice, a holier-than-thou insistence. This is what creates hostility. The Jews despised the Gentiles because they considered themselves better than Gentiles. “We have the Law of Moses,” they said. “The Law is right and true; it reflects the character of God. You Gentiles don’t have the Law.” And in their blindness and self-righteous hypocrisy, they thought they were keeping this Law because they didn’t do some of the outward, external acts the Law prohibited. And so they hated and despised the Gentiles because they thought they were superior. The Gentiles, on the other hand, hated the Jews, because they knew they lived in self-righteous hypocrisy. So there was intense hostility between them.

Jesus’ solution is to take away the Law. Remove that from the picture – help them to see that the Law judges both alike – and you’ll end the hostility. Put them on the same level – so they both need grace, both need forgiveness – and you remove hostility.

This is so beautifully exemplified in a story in the eighth chapter of John’s gospel. Jesus is confronted with a woman taken in adultery. She is dragged before him by a crowd of self-righteous Pharisees who say she has been taken in the very act. (They never mention the man who must have been involved. He gets away.) And the Law, they say, condemns her, says she must die, because she is guilty. And what does Jesus do? He can’t deny the Law. He simply stoops down and begins to write on the ground. No one knows what he wrote. I’ve thought that perhaps he wrote what the finger of God wrote on the wall of the palace in Babylon, when Belshazzar had his feast: “Mene, mene, tekel, upharsin (You have been weighed in the bal-

ances and found wanting),” {Dan 5:25 KJV}. Whatever he wrote, those who watched him became convicted of their own guilt, and, beginning with the eldest, John says, they began to find excuses to get away. One remembered he had an appointment; one heard his wife calling; and so they began to disappear. Finally only the woman and Jesus were left there together. Now, what had he done? Well, he had simply applied the Law to the judges as well as to the judged, that’s all. He’d brought them under the same Law. He’d taken the judges and the judged, had put them into the same bag and shaken them up together, as a woman would with pieces of meat before cooking, and they had come out covered with the flour of the same guilt. When he did this, there was no accusation left.

And this is what Paul says Jesus has done with the Law. He fulfilled the Law in himself, and by doing so, he rendered both Jew and Gentile unacceptable before God. He showed them how the Law was meant to be fulfilled. And when they saw his impeccable life, the Jews knew they were just as guilty as the Gentiles. This is what Paul argues at great length in Romans 2, 3, and 4 – that the Jew has no advantage over the Gentile at all simply because he knows more truth, but that he stands on exactly the same ground – Jew and Gentile need to be forgiven. And so our Lord gave them a common ground of forgiveness. And when he did that, there was no hostility left.

So this is the way to start ending hostility: Stop being self-righteous. Remove the self-righteousness, the demand that one change without any admission of a need for change on the part of the other. This removes hostility. But as long as one insists that the other is all wrong, and there is nothing at all he needs to change, then of course hostility and resentment remain. I’ve seen this work with parents and children. As long as parents insist they never make mistakes, never do anything wrong, never need to apologize, never say “I’m sorry” to their children, those children invariably grow up resenting and hating their parents. Because self-righteousness always creates hostility. It is only when parents see themselves as able to be wrong, needing forgiveness themselves, needing to be understood and set free by the forgiveness of their children, as well as granting forgiveness to them, that there can be harmony. I’ve seen the same principle work between friends, and among church leaders, and other Christians. Hostility

comes by self-righteous demand. Remove that demand, and the hostility ends.

Then what? Is that all? Is God content merely with ending hostility? Never. There is a second step: “that he might create in himself one new man.” Notice the word *create*. That is what only God can do. Man cannot create.

We say of somebody, “He’s creative.” What do we mean? We mean he is able to take things which are already there and put them together in a new way, thus bringing about something perhaps somewhat different. He’s rearranged the material, and we call that creativity, but, in the ultimate sense of the word, only God is creative. Men may be ingenious, but they’re not creative. Only God can take a situation which is nothing, and make out of it something. God creates out of nothing. He makes a new man, a new unity which never existed before.

Many people have experienced this. People often say to me, “You know, since I stopped trying to judge my husband (or my wife), and we’ve come together acknowledging that we both need God, both need forgiveness, I’ve discovered that we have a whole new relationship I never dreamed was possible. It is better than anything we had before. Something new has begun, a greater unity than ever has developed.” Sometimes people come to me and say, “Our marriage is dead. Our love is gone. There’s no way we can restore it. We might as well end the marriage.” It is such a joy then to be able to point out to them that in Christ a new relationship comes into being, something which never was there before. And many have laid hold of this and found it indeed to be true that in the new unity, the new man which grows out of the relationship brought to Christ, there is a freedom and a glory and a beauty and a richness which was never there before, and it is better than it ever was.

Here in Ephesians, of course, the *new man* Paul refers to is the church itself. The church is a picture of what Jesus Christ does. In the church, there is neither Jew nor Gentile. The Jew does not have to become a Gentile; the Gentile does not have to become a Jew. There is a new man, a new person created. And the same is true of any other division among men. Blacks don’t have to become whites, and whites don’t have to become blacks in the church. Both can bring their own distinctive cultural heritage to the church, and they don’t have to give it up. In that sense, the church is never to

integrate; it is to make a new man. They both bring what they are, and they discover that there is a oneness, a fellowship, a union, a beautiful relationship which ultimately has nothing to do with cultural heritage. There is a sense of belonging to one another, and a joy in that relationship. The same is true of the poor and the rich. The poor don’t have to live like the rich; the rich don’t have to live like the poor. There can be different standards of living within the church, but there is a oneness and a joy and an acceptance of one another. The same is true between male and female. Males don’t have to be female; females don’t have to act like males, Women’s Lib notwithstanding. In the church there is oneness. A new unity is formed, which cannot be discovered apart from the settling of hostility on the ground of the peace that Jesus Christ gives.

There is still a third step: “and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross.” In other words, ultimate peace must be with God. A man or a woman, parents or children, husband or wife – wherever the conflict may have been – once the hostility has been ended by the removal of a self-righteous spirit and they have begun to experience this new unity in Christ, must see themselves as being forgiven and accepted by God. Otherwise, self-righteousness will begin to arise again, sooner or later. If there is any area in which one feels superior to the other, in which one says, “I didn’t need quite as much forgiveness as that one did; my level of life was higher,” then self-righteousness starts in again. But if they stand before God on the same level, on the same ground exactly, both needing the same forgiveness, then the hostility is brought to an end. This is what the apostle says, “thereby bringing the hostility to an end.” A complete and total end.

A few months ago I was in another city, and a young man came up to me and said, “I want to tell you about my marriage. I haven’t been married very long. After we were married I discovered that my wife was not a virgin before we were married, though I was. I had a tremendous struggle with this. I forgave her; I understood the situation, understood that she needed to be forgiven. But emotionally I continued to wrestle. Then I began to see that my behavior had been no better than hers, before God. Though she violated the external precepts of sexual morality, I had violated them also, internally, in my thoughts and attitudes. And, before God, there was no difference. I began to see

that I was just as much in need of forgiveness for my failures as she was. When I saw that, then there was healing.”

This is what Paul is saying. We are to see each other as no different whatsoever, before God. If in one area of our life we think we don't need to be forgiven – in that area we are utterly unacceptable to God. If there is an area where we think we have never done wrong, in that area we are totally unacceptable to God. The only ground we have to stand on before him is that of forgiveness, and “not of works, lest any man should boast,” {Eph 2:9 KJV}. Therefore, everyone stands before God on the same level. When people see this, hostility is brought to an end. Nobody is pointing a finger, nobody is blaming the other, nobody is saying, “Well, if only you'd done this, then I could have done that.” All such division and schism and hostility is brought to an end, and there is only the reception of the grace and the forgiveness of God. Hearts are healed, and hostility ends.

This is what is brought out in the last section – **the means of possessing peace**. How do you do this? How do you actually lay hold of it? Well, the apostle says,

And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. {Eph 2:17-18 RSV}

Two steps are necessary actually to lay hold of this kind of peace:

- The first is believing the message God has given you. “He came and preached peace,” says Paul to these Ephesians. That is, “Jesus preached to you.” How did he do it? He didn't come in person; he came in the person of Paul. Paul was sent by the Lord. That is what the word “apostle” means. Paul says in Second Corinthians, “We beseech you on behalf of Christ [in the place of Christ], be reconciled to God,” {2 Cor 5:20b RSV}. Paul's preaching was Jesus' preaching of peace. Christ seized the initiative and sent the apostle to proclaim the fact which God has already brought into being. All that remains is to believe it. When you believe that the ground of self-

righteousness has been removed, that you have no more standing before God, because of what you think has been proper behavior, than somebody who has failed openly and blatantly, then you have begun to believe what God has said. You have begun to believe the preaching of peace. Preaching is never an argument, never a debate or dialogue. Preaching is simply the announcement of a fact. You can either accept it or reject it, but you can't quarrel with it. It is what God says is true. And this is what God says is true – that the ground of self-righteousness has been removed, and a new relationship is possible. A new relationship will come into being which will be better and more beautiful, richer than anything you've known before. And God says he is satisfied with the arrangement, that he accepts you both on those terms.

- Then what? Well, the last step is beautiful. It is communication with the Father: “through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.” You can come before him, upheld by the mystery of the entire Trinity at work on your behalf. This is probably the greatest statement in the book of Ephesians. I don't know a higher plateau of truth than this: “Through him [the Son] we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.” There is the Trinity of God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – all working together to bring us into the closest possible relationship with God: the understanding and the daily experience of his Fatherhood, his Fatherly care over us. So we begin to understand that the circumstances of our life are chosen by the Father, that the trials and pressures and joys and sorrows all have been selected by a loving Father. We begin to see that his provision of power and truth and life is all available in Jesus Christ, and we understand that we can appeal to him. We can cry out to him. He invites us to communicate with him, to unload before him all the burdens and pressures of our life. And we begin to live in this relationship with the Father.

There is nothing higher than this. When the full glory of this relationship breaks upon us, we will have discovered that nothing can be greater. “This is eternal life,” Jesus said, “that they may

know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent," {John 17:3 RSV}.

This is when life begins to be what God intended it to be. So this is where God brings us. We've been climbing with Paul, step by step, up a great mountain. And now we have come to the very summit: "For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father." We can go no higher. Life with the Father is the most delightful of all experiences, for all that we need is provided by a Father's heart, and a Father's love.

This is the way God deals with us and our hostility. What separates us from each other is our insistence that they are wrong and we are right, that there is never any reason for an admission of guilt on our part. But as soon as we admit that we are wrong in the very areas where we think we are right, and that there is no way of justifying ourselves before God in any area of our lives, other than being forgiven, then the hostility ends, and God brings us into that glorious relationship of freedom and enjoyment of life with the Father.

Prayer:

Our holy Father, we thank you for the access we have to you, our loving heavenly Father, One who accepts us, who forgives us, who enjoys us, who glories in us, who is tenderly concerned about the most intimate details of our needs. And, Father, how foolish we've been, oftentimes, to stand in self-righteous judgment against others, to insist that we had areas of life in which we were clear before you, that we didn't need to be forgiven, that only "they" needed it. Father, forgive us for that. How like that unrighteous steward we have often been, when we have been forgiven so much, but have been unwilling to extend forgiveness to another. Awaken us, Lord, to the great debt we have before you. Help us to believe the message of peace which has been preached, to understand the announcement of the Holy Spirit to our hearts, and thus to enter into the joy of life with you. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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The Third Race

by Ray C. Stedman

In Chapter 2 of Ephesians, we have been working through the great revelation of the Apostle Paul concerning the nature of the church. The title of this study, *The Third Race*, is not a reference to an event at Bay Meadows race track, but is an actual description of early Christians by a pagan contemporary in the 1st century. He called them “the third race.” Every nationality tends to divide the world into two parts – “them” and “us.”

- The Jews always have looked upon the world of their day as made up of Jews and Gentiles. Anyone not a Jew is a Gentile in the eyes of the Jewish people.
- The Greeks did the same. There were the Greeks, the “civilized” people, and all the rest were “barbarians.” They based that word on the verb *barbar* which means “to stammer.” Anyone who didn’t speak Greek, the civilized language, sounded to the Greeks like a stuttering child.
- When the Romans took over the Greek civilization, they adopted the same terminology. Everyone within the Roman Empire was Roman; all others were “barbarians.”
- The Chinese did the same thing. *China* is derived from their word for “middle,” for they saw themselves as the center of the earth, the Middle Kingdom. Everyone else lived out on the periphery of the earth.

The Apostle Paul adopts this terminology in writing to the Ephesian Christians. He points out

to them that they began either as Jews or Gentiles – one or the other – and that this division reflected their relationship to God. The Jews were near to God. They were not there yet, but they were close. They had the Scriptures, they had the promises, they had knowledge of God, and contact with him; therefore, they were close, near at hand. The Gentiles were far off. They were pagans, living in superstitious fear. They were immoral. And their outlook on life and the future was that of despair and hopelessness. So they were far off. Now, both were separated from God. The Jews needed to take the final step which would actually bring them to God through Jesus Christ. The Gentiles needed to take that step as well. And, in our last study, we saw how, in coming to Christ, both Jew and Gentile are made one. As Paul says, “The middle wall of hostility is removed,” and they are made one in Christ.

I saw a beautiful illustration of this while in Tucson recently, in a confrontation between the church people and the hippies. The people of the church were, for the most part, godly, gracious, Christian people, but fearful of those with a different lifestyle than they. The hippies were a fine group of young Christians who came out of the youth revolt of our day. But the differences of behavior, of dress, of hair styling, created a hostility which was separating the two groups. And I saw how the Lord worked to remove all these partitions and take away the hostility.

As Paul told us, the Lord does this by removing self-righteousness. Nothing creates hostility as readily as self-righteousness, the presumption that we are all right, and they are all wrong. This arouses distress, creates resentment, polarizes and divides people. A vivid example of this is the way

our current Vice President has been speaking. He has made a great many accusations, some of them perhaps very true. But, because there has been no self judgment, it always sounds as though he considers that “they” are all wrong, while “we” are all right, and there has been unnecessary polarization and division. But this sort of thing is removed, the apostle says, when our Lord comes in and judges both sides, and they stand on common ground, guilty of the same sin, needing the same Savior, exercising the same faith. So they are united and made one. A new unity is created, something different than ever existed before. And this is done before God, so that it is realistic, lasting, permanent.

In the passage we come to now, the apostle goes on to give us the advantages, the privileges, which are a result of this new unity in Jesus Christ between Jew and Gentile. Here we learn once more something of the tremendous resources which are ours as Christians. I don’t know how to say this forcefully enough, for I do not know anything more necessary than that we really devote ourselves to grasping these great facts. For if we understand who we are in Christ, then we will have some understanding of what to do in our circumstances, in our problems. I see many people who are wrestling with terrible anxieties, fears, and hostilities, which actually prevent them from acting as God intended human beings to act, all because they have not discovered the full resources which are available in Jesus Christ. This is why the apostle labored so to set these out before us by direct statement or, as in this case, with certain figures or pictures, so that we might understand more fully. So I would urge you to give careful heed to what he says here, beginning with Verse 19:

So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. {Eph 2:19-22 RSV}

Notice that there are three beautiful figures employed in this passage, which follow one upon the other – each an advance upon the previous one.

These are designed to teach us great truths about what it means to be a Christian. There is the figure of a kingdom (“fellow citizens with the saints”), a family (“members of the household of God”), and a building (“a holy temple ... for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit”). These are designed to instruct us so that Paul’s prayer for us in the first chapter will be answered. His prayer was: “having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches [the enriching possibilities] of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe,” {Eph 1:18-19a RSV}.

Please discard the notion many have that this is only magnificent language. It is not merely language; it is reality. Take these words literally and plainly and personally, because this is what will enable us to understand what to do when we get into difficulty, how to handle problems, and how to work out relationships which are strained or broken. It is with these great resources that we can solve these problems.

Now let us take a closer look at the passage. Notice that the apostle begins with a negative. “You Ephesians,” he says, “are no longer strangers and sojourners.” That is, “Once you were strangers and [literally] foreigners but now no longer.”

What is a stranger? We all have been strangers at one time or another. We have come into a city or state which is different from our own. We haven’t known where to go or what to do, because we were ignorant of the resource, of the community. A stranger is characterized by not knowing much about the place where he is.

A few weeks ago Jim Heaton and I were walking down a street in Spokane, Washington. A man stopped us, and asked, “Could you tell me where the J.C. Penney store is located?” I said, “I’m sorry, I’m a stranger here myself.” I meant, “I’m ignorant of the advantages of this community, of all the cultural possibilities – ignorant of where the finest department stores are located.” Strangers are ignorant. Once we were strangers, says the apostle. We did not know what God could do for us. We had no idea of the resources of peace and joy and forgiveness. We knew nothing of his capacity for handling our fears and our phobias and our hostilities. We did not know what to do with them; we were utter strangers in knowing how to handle

them. But no more, he says. Now that we have come to Christ we are no more strangers.

And we are no longer foreigners, either. A foreigner is different than a stranger. A foreigner may be very familiar with the country in which he lives. He may have lived there for years and may be fully acquainted with the possibilities of it. But he is limited. He is all alien; he has no ultimate rights. He is living on a passport. He does not have a birth certificate which makes him a citizen of that land.

This is very descriptive of many people in churches. They attend church regularly, and sometimes study the Bible, and are familiar with the hymns. Perhaps you have been raised in a Christian family, and the language of Christianity is very familiar to you, but you have never become a Christian. You are a foreigner, you are living on a passport. And, in a time of crisis, aliens are deported, sent back; they are not permitted to enter into the full rights of citizens of the land.

But Paul says that you who have come to Christ are no more strangers and foreigners.

Well then, what are you? Three things, three figures:

First, you are **“fellow citizens with the saints.”** That is a great phrase. It captures the idea of a new kingdom – you have entered a new kingdom. You have changed your citizenship; you are now under another authority.

Most of us who attend PBC are American citizens. We take so for granted the rights of American citizenship that we have almost forgotten the responsibilities of it, and the fact that we are under authority. Because we are Americans, the government has certain powers over us. It regulates certain areas of our life, whether we like it or not. We are under certain controls, and if we do certain things the government can step in and actually take our freedom from us. We are under authority – that is the first mark of citizenship.

The Bible recognizes two kingdoms in this world. In addition, of course, to the nations of earth, with their temporal authority, there are two spiritual kingdoms. And every one of us belongs to one or the other. It is, as Paul says, either the power of Satan or the power of God. One or the other has ultimate dominion over our lives. When you become a Christian, you move out of the kingdom of Satan into the kingdom of God. What a

change this is! There is a basic change of government, of the ultimate rule in a person's life. Jesus often spoke of the kingdom he came to bring among men. He said, “I am a king, but my kingdom is not of this world” {cf, John 18:36-37}, by which he meant that it is not like any of the nations of earth. His kingship is over the hearts of men. But it is a kingdom; it has authority over men. When we come into his kingdom, we come under a new authority, a new king, a new head. We are no longer under the bondage and power of the other. What a transformation this is!

Being in another kingdom, even while we are right here on earth, means that we have certain responsibilities and certain privileges which are given to us in Christ. For instance, every citizen knows that he must learn the history of his nation in order to understand it. We Americans had to go to school and take American History, and thus learn what has happened in the past. And, in a sense, that is what we have been doing on these Sunday mornings at PBC. We are learning from the Apostle Paul the history of this great kingdom of God – what it is, and what has happened, and why we have certain privileges because of what has been recorded.

Then, we have certain concerns we must manifest, and certain choices to make. We have recently voted in a national election. Even if you voted for the loser, you at least exercised the right of choice. As a citizen, you had this right. In the kingdom of God it is exactly the same. Certain choices are now possible for you, and you must make them. You have certain concerns you must become involved with.

But the thing which makes us rejoice in our citizenship is that we have certain privileges. When I travel abroad I am always glad that I am an American citizen. I know there is much in the history of our country which is to be regretted. But every nation has had similar problems. And no nation that I know of has done more to benefit the other peoples of earth. So I rejoice in the great privileges which are mine as an American citizen. I am granted the use of certain resources which other nationalities cannot enjoy. Protection is extended to me as an American citizen which others do not have.

Right now we are all concerned about the fate of the POW's in Vietnam. There are not many of them – less than five hundred. Yet this great nation

of approximately two hundred million people is intensely concerned about their fate. And all the resources of this country are dedicated to doing something for these men. Our President has declared that he will not, under any circumstances, accept a peace which does not involve the freeing of these men. Why? Why should this great nation be concerned about a handful of men? Because they are citizens. They belong to this country. They have the rights and the privileges of citizens. And how grateful we would be, if we were in that group, that this nation has not forgotten us, that it is struggling to do all it can to set us free and to bring us home again. That is the privilege of being an American.

You have something similar in the kingdom of God. You have the protection of a King, and you have the right to expect him to protect you. There is power available – resurrection power, the kind that works beyond human thinking and planning. And God invites you to call upon him for that kind of resource, that kind of deliverance, whenever you need it. There is recourse for the correction of problems. Jesus said, “When people persecute you, rejoice and be glad, because your King has not forgotten you, and there is a great reward laid up for you,” {Matt 5:11-12}. He knows what to do. Furthermore, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord,” {Rom 12:19 RSV}. “Don’t try to work it out on your own,” he says, “I have not forgotten. I know to straighten it out, and to do so in a way that you will ultimately be glad of and not ashamed. I am not merely going to move in and crack heads together; I’m going to solve the problem in a way that will be permanently peaceful.” So we have access to the king, and we can expect his protection and his justice.

And, as Paul points out here also, we share in a tremendous degree of glory. We are fellow citizens with the saints. Who are these saints he is mentioning? As Paul writes, he is thinking in terms of the great saints of the Old Testament, men like Abraham and Moses, Elijah and Elisha, and David, and Isaiah and Jeremiah. We have an inheritance with them; we belong to the same kingdom.

As Americans, many of us are proud that we belong to the nation which produced George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and other great men. And here is an association like that.

We actually become personal friends with men such as Abraham, Moses, David, and Noah. Jesus

himself said, “I tell you, many will come from the east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven,” {Matt 8:11 RSV}. Think of that! What a tremendous privilege to know these people whom God has honored in the past – Paul and Peter and James and John, Luther and Augustine and Wesley. We have often sung the hymns of Charles Wesley and his brother John. Bill Newton and I have speculated that there may be a day when we will sit down with “Chuck” and “Jack” Wesley and talk with them about what they’ve been doing, and what they preached on. This is the intimacy of the kingdom of God, of “fellow citizens with the saints,” and is what it means in terms of honor and glory and protection and power – not just for the future, but now.

Then, the final glory of all – we have access to the King himself. He walks with us, he tells us his plans, his programs, where he is going in history, what he is doing. Just think of the tremendous possibilities of this! We don’t have to dwell on it, but this is something of what the apostle wants us to grasp and reckon upon as a result of the figure he employs here – the marvelous privileges we have in Christ.

Then the second figure: **“members of the household of God.”** This is an advance on the other. We all are citizens of the kingdom, if we are in Christ. We belong to God’s kingdom, that spiritual kingdom which rules over all the nations of earth, and ultimately will be the winner in all of history. But more than that, says the apostle, we are members of God’s own intimate family. John the Apostle never could get over this. He said, “Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called the children of God; and so we are,” {cf, 1 Jn 3:1}. Children of the living God!

You can see what an advance this is. A child always outranks any ambassador or governor or secretary or minister or senator. A biography of Abraham Lincoln I once read related an incident which occurred during the Civil War when the President was involved with his cabinet in a very crucial, decisive meeting. They were in the Cabinet room, working out their grand strategy, when there came a knock at the door. There stood little Willy, the President’s ten-year-old son, wanting to see his father for a moment. Abraham Lincoln laid aside all the duties of state, left all the Cabinet members

cooling their heels, while he saw what Willy wanted. Willy outranked all the others. He had access to his father.

This is the great truth that Paul is trying to bring home to our hearts – the fact that we have access to a Father, a Father who is the King, with tremendous authority and power in the affairs of the world, in life as it is lived right now.

Ron Ritchie and I were sharing recently how a certain member of our congregation has just had a tremendous change of heart, of attitude and outlook. We realized that the reason for it was that people were praying for him. Praying to whom? Praying to a heavenly Father who is a King in authority. It was he who arranged the circumstances and opened this person's eyes, so that the truth began to come home to him and he began to see things rightly. It was he who brought his person back. The provision and protection of a father is always more intimate and personal even than that of a king. A king is concerned about our general welfare, but a father wants to know all about our intimate problems.

Is this not what Jesus teaches? He says again and again, "Do you not know that your heavenly Father knows that you have need of these things? He even knows the number of the hairs of your head," {cf, Luke 12:30, Matt 10:30}. Your Father's concern is all around you, about every aspect of your life. He is not only concerned about getting justice for you. A king does that. But you are the object of his deepest, most intimate, personal concern. As Zechariah tells us, God said of his people Israel, "He who touches you touches the apple of my eye," {cf, Zech 2:8}. Could anything be closer than that?

Yes, there is something. Paul goes on, in the third figure, to an even closer relationship: you are **"built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone."** Perhaps that seems something of an anticlimax. After all, a building is rather cold and impersonal compared with the relationship of a family. But if you look carefully you will see what is in the apostle's mind. He is actually moving closer, higher, to a more intimate relationship, because he is stressing the closeness of the members of the very habitation of God – to one another and to the Lord.

It is possible for the members of a family to be scattered throughout the earth. Some of you have family members who are thousands of miles away. You still are related, still are members one of another, but you are widely separated and haven't seen one another for years. But in the figure of a building, no separation of stones which make up the walls is possible. Everything is closely joined together, knit together. If the stones were separated, the building would crumble. So the apostle really is bringing us into a much more intimate relationship.

Furthermore, he says that this building is a living, growing habitation of God. It merges right into the figure of a body. The building becomes the body of God, the dwelling place where God himself lives. And what could be more personal, more intimate to you, than your body? We reserve the word *intimate* for that which concerns our body. An intimate relationship is one which touches you physically, touches your body. Thus Paul is reminding us of how close we are to God – a God of power, a God of might, a God of love – of how intimate his relationship is to us, and of how he ties us all together, builds us into this tremendous building he is erecting.

Paul mentions that we are built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets – the men who first disseminated the Christian faith, beyond our Lord himself. They are the foundation. Their faith and their teaching is what we rest upon. They had to understand that Jesus was Lord, and the Spirit of God taught them this. I have often thought that the people who had the most difficulty of all in believing that Jesus was God were his own disciples. Imagine them as they walk with him and talk with him and see his humanity. They listen to him laughing and breathing, watch him sleeping and perhaps even snoring, see him subject to the normal limitations of human life, even going through the normal elimination processes – like everyone else. How difficult it must have been for them to grasp the great fact that here was God the Son, become flesh. Yet they came to this knowledge. John says,

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father. {John 1:14 RSV}

They examined him intimately, were with him every moment. For three-and-a-half years they lived closely with him. And there came the conviction that here indeed was God, living in human flesh. He was God, yet manifesting what humanity was to be like. And so on their faith we rest. They taught us the truth about the Lord Jesus. Their faith and teaching is the foundation.

And, the apostle says, Christ himself is the chief cornerstone. When you build a building, you place the cornerstone. And all the measurements of that building are taken from that cornerstone. Everything relates to it. The whole building ties together because of the cornerstone. The apostle depicts Jesus as having that relationship with us. You notice that, all through this letter, he cannot forget him a second. Everything is “in Christ,” “in him,” “by him,” “through him,” “through his blood,” “by his death.” Everything comes to us in Christ. If you do not have Jesus, there is no way you can have intimate fellowship with God. “No man comes to the Father but by me” {cf, John 14:6}, says Jesus. So it is all built on Christ. He is the great cornerstone of our faith. And yet we are all members of it, stones being joined together.

Some years ago I helped Paul Carlson build his house in northern Mexico, among the Tarahumara Indians. He had hired an Indian stonemason to work on the walls. I was very interested to watch him. He had a pile of stones he had dug up and gathered in from the hillside. He would go and look at these stones, and pick one he thought was the right size and shape. Then he would take a chisel and hammer and knock off a piece here and smooth off an edge there, and then place it where he wanted it to go. If it didn't quite fit, he would knock off another piece here and there until it was exactly right. Then he would cement it in place with mortar.

That is exactly the picture Paul has given us here of how God is at work with us. He is knocking off the rough edges, shaping us up, getting us ready. And if he has put you with some people you don't like, it is because they are the chisel he is using to knock off some rough edges. This is no joke; it is exactly what God is doing. He is building a temple, a holy temple – a beautiful, magnificent building.

I do not know anything that makes sense of history, other than this point of view. To read his-

tory apart from this outlook leaves nothing but a meaningless jumble of political campaigns and battles and bloodshed among warring factions. But if you look at history from this point of view you will see that every one of those battles, every one of those campaigns, was part of the process of God – preparing his people, straightening them out, chiseling a piece here, chipping a piece there, sanding them down, smoothing them out, getting them ready, building them in, fitting them in place in this great temple. And one day, the only thing left of history will be this temple God has built, the church of Jesus Christ. Everything else – all our great buildings, all our vaunted progress – will have been lost in the dust of a nuclear storm. The only thing left will be the church of Jesus Christ, the people in whom God dwells. This is what he is doing with us now – building us into this temple. What a difference it makes if we begin to understand some of the possibilities and the privileges which are ours!

When the temple of Solomon was built, we read in First Kings 6:7,

... it was with stone prepared at the quarry; so that neither hammer nor axe nor any tool of iron was heard in the temple, while it was being built. {1 Ki 6:7b RSV}

It was a quiet, secret process. Stones were shaped down in the quarry, and then brought up to be fitted into place without the sound of a hammer. This is a beautiful picture of what God is doing with the church of Jesus Christ today. Already we are temples of the living God. Individually, our bodies are the temple of God himself. If we understand that, and the relationship into which it brings us with God as King and Father, what a great resource we have to draw upon!

Prayer:

Our heavenly Father, our eyes are so often dull and dim. We so often take these figures as though they were mere words on paper. We pray that you will help us to see the living reality behind them, to see what you are doing in our lives, and how you are putting it all together, how you have chosen us and selected us to be stones, part of this living building which is growing together, and how we are to be-

long to each other and draw closer to one another, that we might fulfill your great purpose in having a place to live, a dwelling place of God. Our Father, help us to remember all this in times of personal difficulty, to remember how you are a Father, a great King, and that we have privileges

and rights and access and resources that many of us have never even claimed. Help us now to being living in the fullness of the provision you have made for us – not as servants but as sons of the living God. We ask this, and thank you, in Jesus' name, Amen.

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The Great Mystery

by Ray C. Stedman

The first paragraph in Chapter 3 is, in many ways, the key to this great letter of Paul to the Ephesian Christians. Here he begins to describe in full detail the great mystery which he had devoted his life to propagating around the world. We all love mysteries. There is something about human beings which causes us to be fascinated by something hidden, secret, by cryptic truth which needs to be discovered and revealed. God understands us so thoroughly that he has hidden mystery in everything in life. We do not know anything fully. There is always an element we don't understand. Even terms we commonly use, such as love and joy and life itself, are basically mysterious to us. We know they are absolutely essential to our existence, but we don't know what they are. We struggle constantly trying to understand what are the great realities they represent.

This is true in every area of our lives. Even physicists tell us that, hidden away in every physical manifestation of the world and universe around us, is mystery. The quantum theory, upon which much of modern physics is based, and which has unleashed the whole realm of nuclear fission, has at its heart, say the physicists, a principle of indeterminism, a hidden principle. It states that we never can discover fully the truth about anything; there is an element of hidden information about every subject we go into.

We are ever confronted with mystery. It is mystery which makes life entrancing, fascinating. And God understands this. It is why the Scriptures say, "It is the glory of God to conceal a thing; but the glory of kings is to search it out," {cf, Prov 25:2 RSV}. God knows that we all want to be kings, that we are made to reign. And the glory of kings is to discover that which has been hidden.

The Apostle Paul describes the greatest mystery of life to the Ephesians in these words:

For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles – assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. When you read this you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit; that is, how the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. {Eph 3:1-6 RSV}

There, in very brief form, is his statement of the mystery which lies at the heart of all life. As we will see, this is the greatest secret ever presented to the minds of men. It is not new to us – we have been discussing and discovering aspects of it all along in this letter. But now we come to the full statement of what it is. The paragraph falls very simply into two divisions. Paul is concerned first about his role as a teacher of this mystery, and then about the mystery itself, about what it is he teaches.

Sometimes it is difficult for those who do not read Greek to see how Paul builds his letters. This is particularly true of this passage, because Paul begins "For this reason ..." – but he doesn't give the reason toward which he is moving until Verse 13! This is the way the apostle's mind worked. He starts out to say one thing but then is captured by the truth of something else he is going to say. So he begins to bring it in ahead of time. Then he is carried along from one truth to another until finally he gets back to what he started to say in the beginning. If you read it this way: "For this reason ..." then skip down to Verse 13: "... I ask

you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory,” you will understand what he is trying to say in the intervening sentences.

The apostle was concerned that the Christians to whom he was writing at this time in his life, the Ephesians, Philippians, and others, would understand why he was going through the struggles he was. If you and I had been in Rome with Paul as he wrote this letter, and could have stood in the room of the hired house where he was living, chained day and night to a Roman soldier, and watched as he dictated to his amanuensis, his secretary, watched him as he paced the floor, perhaps, with the soldier having to walk along with him, stopping now and then to make corrections, we would have understood something of Paul’s concern for the recipients of this letter. They could not understand why the mighty apostle had to be a prisoner – limited, unable to come to them in their need as a growing young church – and why all communication with him had to be by correspondence. So he was writing to settle their fears and to show them what it was all about.

His first statement is this: “I am a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles – .” That is the first thing he wants them to know. It is striking that nowhere does Paul ever refer to himself as a prisoner of Caesar. He was Caesar’s prisoner. He had been arrested because he was charged by the Jews with sedition, or treason, against the emperor. Therefore, eventually, he was remanded to the care of the palace guard, the personal bodyguard of the emperor. So here he was in Rome, a prisoner of Caesar, awaiting trial before Nero. But never once does he say that he is a prisoner of Caesar; it is always “a prisoner of Christ Jesus.” The reason is obvious when you read his letters. He saw that Caesar was not the one who had the final say about him; Jesus did. The duration of his confinement was not determined by Caesar, but by the Lord Jesus. As Paul came to understand the One whom he served, he knew that Jesus is in control of history. He saw him as John did in the book of Revelation – as sitting on his throne, holding the reins of government in his hands. He is the One who opens, and no man shuts, who shuts, and no man opens, who orders, and his will is carried out. Paul knew, therefore, that anytime the Lord Jesus decided Paul’s imprisonment would be of no further value, he would be set free, that when the Lord Jesus

spoke, Caesar acted. Therefore, he never saw himself as being the prisoner of Caesar. This is a tremendous lesson to us, who sometimes become worried and anxious about what the political powers-that-be are doing in the world today. Would that we had the faith of this mighty apostle who understood so clearly that Caesar was not in control; Jesus is.

Paul cites some reasons for his imprisonment. The first is that he was a prisoner on behalf of the Gentiles. This refers not only to the fact that his arrest had come about because he was preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, but also to the fact that it benefited the Gentiles. Do not forget that the reason Paul was charged by the Jews with sedition against the emperor was because they were so angry that he would carry any message from God to the Gentiles. Jewish scruples and prejudices were terribly offended by the fact that Paul had the nerve, the effrontery, to say to the Jews that the Gentiles were received by God equally as they, that the Gentiles could have equal standing before him. When Paul spoke to the Jewish mob in his own defense, after he was arrested in the temple courts, the thing which triggered their renewed ire was the word *Gentile* in his message. They had been listening carefully to him as he spoke of his conversion, of how he had been called by God, until he stated that he had been sent out unto the Gentiles. Then all hell broke loose again. They mobbed him and would have lynched him on the spot had it not been for the intervention of the Roman guard. So it was because of this great message that he was a prisoner.

Furthermore, he wants these Ephesians to know that they were benefiting by his arrest. I think this is a hint that he recognized that if it were not for the fact he had been made a prisoner, he would never have had time to write these letters which have changed the course of history. His concern for these people was such that he would have gone to them had he been free. He would have preached to them and taught them directly from the Word, but never would have had time to write it down. So perhaps the reason the Lord Jesus kept him a prisoner was that he might have time to write.

He may have to do that with some of us, too. Some of you have learned truth you ought to write down and pass along. And I wonder if sometime the Lord isn’t going to lock me up to give me a

chance to write some of the things he has laid on my heart. I hope I'll learn from the lesson of Paul in this respect. Writing these letters is the greatest thing the apostle ever did, for it is these which have changed our lives. And he recognizes that they were written on behalf of the Gentiles.

The second thing Paul says about himself, so that they might understand what he was going through, is that he was a steward of God's grace. God had committed a certain responsibility to him. I'm glad the Revised Standard Version translates this word *stewardship* instead of *dispensation*, for *dispensation* is often misunderstood in our day. But if we see it as a stewardship we will understand it. A steward was a servant to whom a certain responsibility was committed, certain goods were given, that he might dispense them, might give them out to other people. This is the biblical idea behind the word *dispensation*. It is not a period of time at all; it is a responsibility to dispense something, a stewardship. This is what Paul said was given to him. He was a responsible steward. This is exactly in line with what he had written to the Corinthians much earlier. In First Corinthians 4 he says,

This is how one should regard us [apostles], as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. {1 Cor 4:1 RSV}

The "mysteries" are the sacred secrets that God knows about life, which men desperately need to know. Think of this! This is what Paul says we Christians are – beginning with apostles, and including everyone who names the name of Christ – we are servants of Christ, and stewards, responsible servants, given the responsibility of dispensing the mysteries of God, of helping people understand these great secrets which explain life and make it possible to solve the difficulties and problems of our human affairs. To us is committed this responsibility. This is how Paul sees himself – as a steward of the mysteries of God.

And, more than this, he was taught this personally by none other than the Lord Jesus himself. "It was made known to me by revelation." This is where we get our understanding of the authority of this great apostle. There are those who tell us that the Apostle Paul learned his gospel from the other apostles, who in turn had heard it from Jesus, and that, therefore, Paul's apostleship is somewhat less

than theirs. But Paul says this is not true. He tells us very plainly in his letter to the Galatians that when he was converted on that Damascus road, "I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ," {Gal 1:12 RSV}. He didn't talk with the apostles; in fact, it was three years before he ever went back to Jerusalem after his conversion. And then he saw only James, the Lord's brother, and they didn't talk about doctrine. It wasn't until fourteen years later that he ever had an opportunity to sit down and compare notes with all the other apostles. And, he says, they added nothing to him. He understood everything they did, knew everything Jesus had taught them in the days of his flesh.

A striking example of this is found in First Corinthians 11, where he writes about the Lord's supper. He says, "For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, 'This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me,'" {1 Cor 11:23-24 RSV}. In other words, Jesus himself had appeared to Paul and had told him all that went on in the Upper Room. So when Peter and James and John and the other apostles began to compare notes with Paul, they were astonished that this apostle, this man who had been the persecutor of the church and the chief murderer of the saints in Jerusalem, understood not only the doctrine they had been taught, but also the very events they had gone through. Thus they had to acknowledge that he was an apostle on equal terms with them. This is what gives Paul his authority.

Every now and then we run across someone who says, usually in defense of Women's Liberation, that Paul was a crusty old bachelor whom no one can really trust, and that we must understand that he was conditioned by the culture of his time, and that therefore one must pick and choose among his writings. Paul himself, and all the other apostles, would deny this. Here was a man who spoke with direct authority, commissioned by the Lord Jesus himself.

The third element of his stewardship, Paul says, is that it has given him great insight: "... the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly." Scholars are not exactly sure what he meant by that. Some feel that he had written another letter before this, which had ex-

plained much of this mystery. But personally I think it is a reference to what he has written previously in this letter. In Chapter 1, Verses 9-10, he says,

For he [God the Father] has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fulness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. {Eph 1:9-10 RSV}

That is the brief statement he had written to these Ephesian Christians, and to which he refers. He says, "When you read this you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ." That is, "You can understand that I have great grasp and understanding of what this mystery is, that it is really the secret of all things, touching everything in life. It is at the heart of all human existence. It is the mystery of the goal toward which God is moving in human affairs; therefore, it encompasses space, time, matter – all of life." And he sums it up in these words: "the mystery of Christ" – Jesus Christ, at the heart of all things.

None of us can help but be aware that this is an extremely troubled time in which we are living:

- We do not know how to solve the problems which are overwhelming us.
- We are being swamped by our own inventions. We continue to make automobiles even after they have filled the highways and poisoned the air. We don't know how to break loose from this syndrome.
- We don't know what to do with the millions of people who have been shoved off into ghettos, areas of our cities where economic pressures force them to live, and prevent them from having available to them the resources of life that many of us enjoy. We don't know how to balance this.
- We don't know how to feed the world.
- We are unable to stem the tide of broken marriages, and so our divorce rate is higher than that of any other nation in the world.

We don't know what to do about these things. Why? Many writers – thoughtful, perceptive men – are sitting down and trying to analyze where we have gone wrong, and why cannot we understand what to do. Some propose one solution and some another; some are partially right, and some are almost totally wrong. But the reason they cannot grasp the answer is that they have never dealt with the heart of the problem, the great secret to all things. The key mystery is Christ, says the apostle.

If you read that as merely theological language, you have missed the import of what he is saying – that every bit of life finds its final solution in the person and being of the Lord Jesus himself. God has set his Son at the heart of all things. Therefore the understanding of this great mystery is the key to the ultimate solutions for which men are seeking today. If we begin to understand what Christ is, who he is, what he does, how we can lay hold of him – we will begin to see the solutions of these problems unfold, as they are indeed unfolding in many of our lives. Solutions are coming into being as we grasp what Christ has made available to us. I know that sometimes we are so blinded by familiarity with these terms that we miss the impact of this. But I pray that God will open the eyes of your understanding, that you will see how fantastic is this great mystery, and how important it is to understand it thoroughly, and to enter into it.

When Einstein discovered his theory of relativity, very few people grasped it or understood it. But when people began to operate on its basis, even though they didn't fully understand it, they began to change the world. Our whole modern era was brought about by the discovery of a secret which was hidden in nature until the time when Einstein stumbled upon a few hints of it. And there is much yet to be learned, even in this realm. But how much more are there great riches in store for us who will give some time and thought and effort to grasping this great secret which Paul sets forth before us here – the ultimate secret behind all things: the mystery of Christ!

In this next sentence he gives us a brief summary of this great mystery:

When you read this you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been re-

vealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit; that is, how the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. {Eph 3:4-6 RSV}

There is the mystery:

The first thing he says about it is that it has been hidden in the past. That is, great men of God in the Old Testament did not understand this mystery. As Paul looks back upon these great men of the past – Moses, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and others – he says that though they understood much, though they looked into the future far beyond our own day and God showed them what the end of all things would be, nevertheless they did not understand this mystery. The secret was hidden to men of past ages. When did it begin to open up? The answer is, in Jesus Christ. The Lord Jesus himself began to unfold the mystery. I refer you to Matthew 13, where you have it recorded that our Lord spoke these amazing words. In Verse 34, Matthew tells us this:

All this Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed he said nothing to them without a parable. This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet:

**“I will open my mouth in parables,
I will utter what has been hidden since the
foundation of the world.”**

{Matt 13:34 RSV}

Our Lord, then, began to unfold this mystery, to tell us things that were hidden from the very foundation of the world. So it is obvious, from what the apostle says here in Ephesians, that God needed to prepare human beings for the unfolding of this secret. He had to get them ready for it. This he did with the rituals and symbols in the Old Testament – the giving of the Law and the sacrifices – which helped us to understand that we human beings have something inherently wrong with us, which cannot be cured by our making a few good resolutions. Rather, it is something that is drastically and terribly and deeply wrong. The only thing that can cure it is death itself. God had to prepare this race to be able to grasp that fact and to be ready to believe it. And even then he had not fully revealed this mystery. A little was revealed in the past, but the great secret was kept hidden.

But it has now been revealed, Paul says, “to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.” There is a line of teaching called *ultradispensationalism*, in which certain teachers (who are genuine believers in Christ) teach that only the Apostle Paul knew this secret, that to him was given the privilege of unveiling it for the first time to human minds and hearts. But, as we have already seen, it was the Lord Jesus who began to unveil it. And, as Paul himself says here, it was made known to all the apostles and prophets, i.e., the writers of the Scriptures, such as Luke and James and others who were not apostles, but who were prophets. In the closing verses of Romans 16 there is a very clear statement on the unveiling of this mystery:

Now to him who is able to strengthen you, according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed and through the prophetic writings [i.e., the Scriptures] is made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith – to the only wise God be glory for evermore through Jesus Christ! Amen. {Rom 16:25-27 RSV}

Now we come to the actual mystery itself. It consists of this great truth: That the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and joint partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. Here Paul does something that he does frequently (and only the Apostle Paul does this) – he coins words. He runs out of language, is unable to put what he wants to say into the words at his disposal. So he invents new ones. He puts words together. And here he makes up three words which you find nowhere else in the Greek New Testament. They are, literally:

- Joint-heirs,
- Joint-bodies, and
- Joint-partakers.

When they come to Christ, Jews and Gentiles together are joint heirs, joint members of one body, and joint partakers of the promise. What is he talking about?

Well, in those three terms you have the answers to the greatest struggles with which we humans are engaged today:

1. “Joint-heirs” has to do with possessions. Here he is touching the whole problem of man and his universe, man living in a natural world, the dominion (or lack of it) of man over that world, and the reason why we cannot solve our ecological riddles. The answer, as is detailed in other places in Scripture, is that the old creation which has existed since the beginning of time is gripped by an unbreakable law, which Paul calls “the law of decay” in Romans 8. It is The Second Law of Thermodynamics, if you want the scientific term for it, the law of entropy. This law states that energy is becoming less available, everything is running down, deteriorating. And we cannot break this law. This is why the ecological problems of today are unsolvable. There is no way we can break through this law. But Paul says that in Christ the breakthrough has occurred. In Christ, God is beginning a new creation, one that lives by a wholly different principle and is not subject to this law. And this creation has already begun!

You see, the thing which was not taught in the Old Testament was the resurrection of Jesus, and the effects of it in our lives right now. In the Old Testament there is very little reference to the resurrection of the body. There are a few references – just enough to teach the truth, so that the Old Testament believers knew there was life beyond death. But they didn’t know what kind of life, what it would be like. This was hidden from them. They died in hope, but that hope was not very well defined. And the one thing they did not know at all was that the life beyond death, resurrection life, could be made available to us while we are still living. This is what they never understood. You will never find that taught in the Old Testament in those terms. But this is what the apostles were teaching – that God has already broken through the old creation, and, right in the midst of the old, he is creating a new. Men and women today can live on the basis of this new creation.

We can learn how to handle our environment, even, on the basis of this new creation yet today. Christians have the answer to the

ecological crisis. This is why Dr. Francis Schaeffer has written a book called *Pollution and the Death of Man*, and related this subject to the Christian answer. This is the only way these problems can be worked out. What we are to inherit from God, ultimately, is the world. Paul tells us, “All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future, all are yours;” {1 Cor 3:21b-22 RSV}. And the book of Hebrews tells us that we do not yet see all things subject to Christ, but we do see Jesus, the One who has been made heir of all things, and in him we share that heirship, so that one day all things subject to this new law will be ours. One day there will be a reversal of the law of decay, and all things will begin to pick up energy again and be renewed, revitalized, in tremendously increasing degree.

2. In the realm of performance this is already true. This is the struggle of humanity which is answered by our becoming “joint-members of one body.” Why can’t we get along with one another? Why do we fight each other? Why are there so many family breakups? Why is there so much hatred and resentment and bitterness and malice? Because when we are still living in the old creation those things are inevitable. If you fulfill the flesh, there is no way by which you can keep from living in disharmony with people around you. Ah, but in the realm of the Spirit the breakthrough has already occurred. When we begin to “walk in the Spirit,” as we understand what that phrase really means, then we can love, forgive, begin to reach out to others. The whole experience of life is transformed, right now.
3. Finally, the apostle touches the matter of power: “partakers of the promise.” The promise was of the giving of the Holy Spirit – that God’s Spirit himself would live in us, and empower us to do everything God wants us to do. Any time we know there is something we ought to do, something we should do, something it would be right for us to do, but which we don’t want to do – if we then cast ourselves in helplessness upon the Lord Jesus and trust his word, we can assume the power of the Spirit to do that thing. And the power of the Spirit will

always come flowing through right at that point, to enable us to do what otherwise we could never do.

This is Paul's explanation of the great mystery. It is a breakthrough, a new and marvelous way of life which has already begun in our experience, and which, ultimately, will solve all the problems facing humanity. The remarkable thing about it is that you can experience it right now. In Colossians Paul puts it this way: "Christ in you, the hope of glory," {Col 1:27b}. It is the only hope you will ever have of living according to the glory God designed for man when he created him in the beginning.

Put in these terms, this means that the present "civilization" we are living in secular life, with its politics, its education, its legislative system, its reportage of news events can be likened to a cocoon, clinging lifelessly to the branch of history. But inside that cocoon, God is working a metamorphosis; a transformation is taking place. And one of these days that cocoon will open, in the Springtime of the world, and a new being will step out – a being which is being created at this time right within the cocoon.

This is a great parable that God teaches us in nature. Did you ever wonder why caterpillars crawl on the ground? Why don't they run around on four legs? Because God is teaching us things in nature, if we could only see. This is a picture of life in the flesh, the natural human life. Everything that lies in a caterpillar's path is a horrible obstacle over which it must painfully crawl. It cannot see very far, and doesn't know which turn to take. This is an apt description of the way we live our lives as natural human beings. But God has a program for a caterpillar. He has a wonderful plan for its life. I don't know if anyone has told "The Four Spiritual Laws" to a caterpillar, but it would be interesting to do so, because the first point would be, "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life." What is it? "That you'll die, that you'll come to the end, that somehow all your old life as a caterpillar will decay and you will be left lifeless and dead, in a cocoon of your own spinning, hanging on a limb, and apparently it will all be over." But it isn't over. Right in the midst of that cocoon something happens. We don't really know what it is. Nobody has yet ever found out what goes on inside a cocoon that transforms a caterpillar into a

butterfly. But we know that one of these days, when the sun begins to shine, all these dead-looking cocoons will begin to break open, and there will emerge a beautiful creature, designed no longer for life on the lower level, crawling along over every obstacle, but able to rise above them, able to spread its wings and fly as an expression of beauty and joy throughout the world and nature. This is God's lesson regarding what he is doing now. The cocoon is the old creation, and in the midst of it the new is taking shape. And we can live in that new creation right now. This is the great mystery.

This may seem like old stuff to you, for unfortunately these words have come so frequently to our ears that we've lost the impact of them. But I hope you can go back, perhaps during this Christmas season, and think again of the breathless wonder of this great mystery which Paul declares to us – how in Jesus Christ we can step out of the old, already, into the new creation. And the effects of it can be felt in our relationships with others, in our attitudes within, in our treatment of the environment around, in our enjoyment of the world of nature which is already present around us, and ultimately, in the power of the Holy Spirit imparted to us to make us live as we ought to live, in the fullness of joy and peace and life and glory and rejoicing before God. One of these days, Springtime is going to come to the world, and when it comes, what God as already been preparing will then become manifest.

Now, you can't wait till that time to get on the bandwagon; it has already started. This is the great mystery. It has already begun. And you are either a part of the new creation, or you are a part of the old; one or the other, but never both. You may live your life as a member of the new creation – in the midst of the old, but not part of it any more – "no longer strangers, no longer foreigners," says the apostle. "You have broken with all that. Therefore, live life as members of a new race," is his exhortation. "Stop going on in the old way. Don't go on any longer subject to all the heartache and misery and malice and hatred and resentment and oppression which comes from the old creation. Rather, break loose and be free in Jesus Christ."

When you do, you will understand the practical import of this fantastic mystery which is at the heart of all life, and which God will begin to unfold to us more and more as we go on, until it simply

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'blows our minds' with the wonder of what is waiting for us.

This is what Christmas is all about. This is what began at Bethlehem. The first breakthrough was on Christmas Day, when in the darkness of the world – sunk in apathy and misery, in superstition and blindness, and in death – a light broke through. "A people who sat in darkness saw a great light," {cf, Isa 9:2 RSV}. And that light has been reaching out to the world ever since, bringing men out of the old into the new.

I don't know how you think of yourself, but I know that it helps greatly to personalize these great truths, to remember that this is where God wants

the application finally to be made – right home into your hearts, into your lives, into your families. You are a new creation in Jesus Christ. You are no longer part of the old but part of that new program which, looking into the future, is waiting for the dawn of a new world, a new life, and a new day, when all God's people shall be one over all the earth, and no harm or heartache will occur in all the world.

This is the mystery, as Paul describes it to us, and as God wants us to understand it.

May God help us to make it personal in our own lives.

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Secret Riches

by Ray C. Stedman

We are dealing again with the great mystery which the Apostle Paul glories in, a mystery which began at Bethlehem with the song of the angels to the shepherds, and the beauty of a huge star shedding its silver glory upon the waiting earth below, and all the marvel of that first Christmas Day when the wonder which had been secret for ages began to be unfolded – the glory of what God had in mind for man.

In the third chapter of Ephesians, beginning with Verse 7, we come to the apostle's further explanation of what he calls in Chapter 6, "the mystery of the gospel" – this great good news which has done so much to change human lives.

As we saw in our last study, in the opening words of this third chapter,

- This great mystery is the answer to the struggles that men have with their environment. Paul showed us how Jews and Gentiles together are made to be joint heirs of God, able to enter into all the physical possessions that God had in mind when he put man on this earth in the beginning.
- It is also the answer to the problems of our humanity, of our fallen character – war and enmity and hatred and cruelty. Paul showed us how in Jesus Christ men are made joint members of one body, and all the middle walls that separate them are removed. This has been demonstrated clearly again and again when people of different backgrounds and cultures and classes, different outlooks, different races, have come together in Christ and found that all the differences which once seemed to be so tremendous are reduced to nothing, and they are able to overleap them and be healed in their fellowship together.

- And then we saw that the mystery of the gospel is the answer to the impotence of man – the fact that we are unable, oftentimes, to fulfill our ideals and to realize our dreams. We are failures in doing what we know we ought to do – to love, to forgive, to restore. But in the mystery of the gospel, Jews and Gentiles alike are made joint partakers of the promise of the Spirit of God. The power of God is given to us to do what we otherwise could never do. Those who have learned to reckon upon this power find they are able to love and forgive when they never could have otherwise. So this gospel touches the heart of humanity's problems.

As we come into the section beginning with Verse 7, we learn much more about this great mystery:

Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace which was given me by the working of his power. To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given ... {Eph 3:7-8a RSV}

The personal note with which he begins this section is explained in Verse 13, where he says,

So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory. {Eph 3:13 RSV}

The reason he wrote this section of the letter is that these Ephesian Christians were troubled by his suffering – not so much because they felt sorry for him, for of course they did, but because their faith was being threatened by it. They were really troubled that a great apostle – the very fountainhead of

truth, as far as they were concerned – should appear to be a helpless victim of Caesar’s cruelty, chained to a Roman soldier day and night. Their faith was very seriously threatened by this. Paul writes back, and says, “You’ve got it all wrong. You see, you don’t understand what suffering is. Suffering for the cause of Christ is the sure way to victory.” This mighty apostle had learned that the cross is always the way to a crown, and that there is no way to guarantee that the victory is certain unless there is an element of the sufferings of Christ being filled up within the physical body of a Christian, of a believer in Jesus Christ. So Paul is writing to assure them that everything is right. There is nothing at all wrong about his position. It is exactly right and he glories in this fact.

You will notice that there is a sense of amazement and wonder as he writes these words: “Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God’s grace which was given me by the working of his power.” Two things are cited here which the apostle never got over being amazed at:

1. One was the value of the gift God had given him. This gift, which opened to him his tremendous ministry, came to him, he says, by the grace and power of God. God himself gave this gift.

You remember that, in First Corinthians 12 and Romans 12, Paul describes the gifts of the Spirit, and he says that these are given to every believer, to everyone who is a member of the new creation in Jesus Christ. This is quite in harmony with what God has done in the old creation. When we were born into this human life, this natural life, we received certain gifts. We call them talents. Some of you are musically inclined. Some of you are artistic. Some of you have leadership abilities. Some can speak. Some can write. You have various talents. They are part of God’s gifts to Adam, and, in his fallen nature, they have been passed on to us. Therefore it is only right that when there is a new creation, a new man, he too should be given talents. Just as you discover and fulfill your natural life by discovering your natural talents, so you fulfill your new life by discovering the gifts of the Spirit which God has given to you.

Here is one of the gifts that Paul revealed in. As I read this list of the gifts of the Spirit, I

think it is very likely that this great apostle had every one of the gifts of the Spirit. I find several he unquestionably possessed. The gift he is talking about here is the gift of evangelism. When he says in Verse 8,

To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles ... {Eph 3:8 RSV}

The word translated *to preach* really means “to evangelize” the Gentiles. So Paul had the gift of evangelism among his many gifts, and this is what drove him out and made him long to reach to the far corners of the earth to preach Christ to people who had never heard of him before. He had this hunger within, which is characteristic of the gift of evangelism.

And this gift led to his particular ministry, which was to the Gentiles. A gift is the ability to do something. The ministry is the area in which it is done. It is the Lord Jesus’ prerogative to assign that ministry to every one of us. You all have gifts, if you know Jesus Christ. Your gift is to be discovered. Then the Lord Jesus will lead you into the place to operate that gift. And that is your ministry. Every believer ought to have a ministry. This is what makes the church function as God intended it to do – as each one of us has discovered our gifts and the ministry the Lord Jesus has given us. Both Peter and Paul had gifts of evangelism. But Peter’s ministry was to the Jews and Paul’s was to the Gentiles. Some of you may have a ministry to children. Some may have a ministry to older people. Some to blacks. Some to Chicanos, perhaps. But a particular gift can be exercised in all of these ministries, you see. So the gift opens the door to the ministry. Paul never got over the wonder of that gift. What a glorious thing it was, he said, that God had given him the great gift to preach this tremendous message to men who had never heard the good news before.

2. The second thing he never got over was his amazement at the weakness of his own person. Notice his language here: “To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was

given...” I know some people think Paul is merely being polite here, depreciating himself as we might. But I am sure that the apostle felt deeply in his heart what he put into words. This is not looking back to when he was a Pharisee. This is a present assessment of his worth: “the very least of all the saints.” This is what Paul thought of himself.

I have heard people say, as they have read some of Paul’s writings, “This man is an egoist. He talks about his holiness and his faithfulness and his tenderness and compassion. He says, ‘Be imitators of me, even as I am of Christ,’” {1 Cor 11:1 RSV}. They are amazed at what they think to be the conceit of the Apostle Paul. But if you really want to know what he thought of himself, here it is. In fact you can detect a gradual change of this apostle’s idea of himself. In the first Corinthian letter, which was written earlier than this, he says, “I am the least of all the apostles,” {cf, 1 Cor 15:9}. That is only last in a list of thirteen. Here he says, “I am the least of all the saints.” In fact, he invents a word here, puts the comparative and the superlative together: “I am less than the least of all the saints.” That estimation is quite a bit lower. But when he wrote Second Timothy, his last letter, he said, “I am the chief of sinners,” {cf, 1 Tim 1:15}. Now that is progress! It is right in line with what our Lord said would happen: You remember that he said, “Take my yoke upon you and learn of me,” {Matt 11:29a KJV}. What are you to learn about him? Well, “I am meek and lowly of heart,” {Matt 11:29b KJV}. Here we are face to face with the phenomenon which is frequently seen in the great leaders and saints of the past. It is that the older they grow, the more acute is their own sense of sin and of weakness in themselves. They see that what they once thought to be natural strengths are really weaknesses. So if this is beginning to happen to you, you are growing as a Christian.

I remember that, when I began my Christian life, as a young man, I thought I was very close to being acceptable. For the most part I had a pretty good record. There were a few areas I well knew were not right, but I thought that if God straightened those out, everything would be fine. But gradually God has opened my eyes to see that, in

those areas where I thought I was doing well, I was utterly repugnant, in God’s presence, utterly rejected by him. My strengths were really my weaknesses, I have had to learn through the years. I ran across a quotation from the great psychologist, Carl Jung, which says this very well:

In the second half of life [Some of you haven’t arrived there yet. But you will, if you hang on. So this lies ahead] the necessity is imposed of recognizing no longer the validity of our former ideals, but of their contrary, of perceiving the error in what were previously our convictions, of sensing the untruth in what was our truth, and of weighing the degree of opposition and even of hostility in what we once took to be love.

That is an accurate statement of the experience of those who begin to see themselves. And as Paul began to understand the full revelation of the mystery which is in Jesus Christ, the clarity of his knowledge made him able to see himself as he was. And the more he saw himself the more he said, “I am utterly dependent upon the grace of God. There is no strength in me.” Some of us are beginning to say with Paul, “In me, that is, in my flesh, there dwells no good thing. Only that in me which is of God is worthwhile,” {cf, Rom 7:17 KJV}.

The glory of the mystery is right there – out of weakness comes strength. And when this mighty apostle could say of himself, “I am less than the least of all the saints,” this was when he was able to go on and describe a fantastically effective ministry. In these next verses you have it set forth in beautiful terms:

To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all men see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. {Eph 3:8-10 RSV}

What he is saying is that his ministry had a fantastic effect, and it was threefold in its dimensions:

1. First, there was the discovery by those to whom he preached of unsearchable riches in Christ. What is he talking about? Well, he is saying that the first effect of the ministry of the gospel is the enrichment of life right now. Wherever Paul preached, hearts were changed, hurts were healed, families restored, the bad habits of a lifetime were broken, and joy and hope and love and peace began to come into people's lives. Every place he went, Paul formed colonies of whole persons, of healed people who were rejoicing in a wonderful sense of liberty and freedom in Christ. Those are the unsearchable riches of Christ, right now – not in heaven someday but right now!

The same thing is happening today. This past week, Bob Smith, one of our pastors who is at home recovering from a severe heart attack, picked out a handful of letters from the thousands he has received, and sent them to the rest of our staff for us to share in his joy. They reflected the blessings people have experienced as they have been helped by Bob's ministry through the years:

- There was a letter from a husband who had been set free from heroin addiction and had enjoyed a tremendous change in his home because of that.
- There was a letter from a young man in the service who wrote to give thanks for all he had been taught through the years. He had never realized it was so important until he was out facing life in a cold, cruel, and miserable world.
- There was a letter from a former leader of Women's Lib, who had found the secret of womanhood in Jesus Christ and gloried as she never had in what she had known before.
- There were letters from long-time Christians who were overflowing with the glory of thirty years of living with Jesus Christ.

My mail has been very similar. I want to share with you the opening paragraphs of a letter from a former member of the church here

who has moved away to another area. This is what he wrote:

This Christmas is very special to me. I will never forget this year. This was the year that the Lord revealed himself to me in a most remarkable way. Last year saw me lose a substantial part of my life's savings in a fraudulent business venture. This year the deteriorating trend continued with problems in my health, my job, and within the church I attend. Then came word that my daughter's marriage was breaking up. All coincided to bring me to a new low. I was really hurting. Everything seemed to be going wrong. And I was in a state of total despair.

At this point I cried out, "Where are you God? Help me!" He answered by prayer gloriously, and I was filled with assurance. My troubles have not disappeared, but I am able to cope with them, and my understanding of God has expanded. I am joyous. [What brought about the change? He says,] It was totally the gift of God. I do give thanks also to friends who knew my plight – although they didn't know how bad it was – and were praying for me, and to the new pastor of our church, who is very effective. There was also the radio ministry of Christian broadcasts which I listen to as I am on the road 95 miles each day traveling to and from work. I thank God that he is showing me how life is meant to be lived. And my desire now is to live it his way, regardless of outward circumstances. [Then he underlines:] I know that my Redeemer lives.

There are the unsearchable riches of Christ. How many thousands, even millions, living today could add to this story! How many right in our own congregation could stand and tell of enormous enrichment of life! That is a part of the unsearchable riches in Jesus Christ, as the glory of this tremendous mystery breaks upon human hearts and people begin to discover how life was meant to be lived in the first place. The story can never be fully told until we get to glory. Only then will we ever know anything of the incredible depths of the riches of Jesus Christ.

2. Then Paul speaks of the second dimension of the effect of his ministry – the distribution of a universal knowledge. He says it was given to him “to make all men see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things...” Isaiah, in that great ninth chapter of his prophecy, predicted that the people who walked in darkness would see a great light, that those who dwelt in the land of deep darkness, upon them would the light shine. And then he goes on in that chapter to write that well-known verse:

**For unto us a child is born,
unto us a son is given,
and the government shall be upon his
shoulder,
and his name shall be called,
“Wonderful, Counselor, The Mighty
God,
The everlasting Father, The Prince of
Peace.” {cf, Isa 9:6 KJV}**

He is the light which illuminates the darkness, and this is exactly what Paul says. The word translated *to make* (all men) *see* really means “to enlighten” all men – to bring light to all men about the knowledge of this mystery. And it should be the “stewardship” of the mystery, literally, rather than the *plan* of the mystery. Paul gloried in enlightening men with this tremendous secret because he knew that the extent of good government, of international peace, of law and order, of enlightened education, of control of demonic forces, of true progress in the realm of technology and science, is proportionate to the degree to which this mystery is known and understood, and believed, by men. This is what changes life.

And this is why he ties with this the phrase “God who created all things.” God has ordained life to this end, and it is he who enables men to reach out, to learn, to grasp, to understand – according to the degree to which the secret of life is spread in a society.

You have only to look at the history of our nation in the last ten years to see how true this is. When the light of the gospel begins to grow dim, then immediately anarchy, lawlessness, violence, rebellion, and revolution begin to increase immediately. Superstition, occultism,

and darkness come flooding back in as soon as the light begins to dim. God teaches us this on the physical level. Light a candle in a dark room and it is mostly darkness with a little light. Come into a room where there is ample illumination and the darkness is completely gone. But let that illumination dim, and the darkness increases on every hand.

Paul knew this great secret. He knew that the enjoyment of human life, of pleasures and recreation, is entirely dependent upon the degree to which the gospel penetrates a people. Therefore he gloried in spreading this word in the dark and weary pagan community into which he came in that 1st Century.

We need to understand, as this verse tells us, that this mystery was hidden by God until the world was ready for it. The world needed to be prepared for this great secret. And all the ages of history before the coming of the Lord Jesus were simply God’s way of getting the world ready for the unfolding of this tremendous mystery – the glory of a man, Jesus, who fulfills the wonder of uniting God and man, and makes the rest of man partakers of the divine nature. There is nothing in all the world like this great secret. And God had to get us ready for it.

I ran across a very helpful quotation from Dr. Arthur Custance, a very godly Canadian scientist. He says,

The processes of history have special significance because the crucifixion could not be merely an isolated event occurring in some dark age of lawlessness and barbarism, or in some corner of the earth where knowledge of it might filter back into the world only by accident. It was an event which had to be appropriated, witnessed, and recorded, which had to be performed in an orderly, legal way, according to an accepted standard of behavior and judgment to which mankind as a whole would give rational consent. It had to occur at a time when the event itself would be sufficiently public, one might say publicized, that there could never be doubt about its having happened. It had to come to pass when there was a sufficiently sophisticated and dependable means of communicating the news to a large population that was not merely nu-

merous but fluid, so that word of it could be carried far and wide.

He goes on to speak of the need for a legal code, and for a police force with sufficient strength to prevent a lynching, and a universal language, so the message would be culturally universal. And then he says,

These circumstances may have occurred repeatedly since that time, and perhaps upon occasion in an even more effective way. But it is almost certain that this was the first time that the circumstances had all occurred together. The Roman Empire guaranteed, at least for a short while, a world ideally ordered as a proper setting, both cultural and legal.

This is what Paul meant when, in Galatians, he said, “When the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law ... in order that we might receive the adoption as sons,” {cf, Gal 4:4-5}. This was the beginning of the unfolding of this fantastic mystery which is the secret of the governing of human lives.

3. The last thing the apostle says is that his ministry had the effect of demonstrating of a unique wisdom: “that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places.” This is to go on now, while the church is being formed. It is a revelation in which these “principalities and powers” are learning something by observing the church. What does he mean? Well, this is one of the instances in which Scripture clearly states that we are surrounded by an invisible spiritual kingdom made up both of demons and angels. In Ephesians 6 Paul says, “We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers in the heavenly places – wicked spirits from the very headquarters of evil itself,” {cf, Eph 6:12}. But we also learn from other passages that angels are watching us. It is as if we are on stage in a great theater, with the angels gathered around in rows and rows, watching us, learning from what is happening here in the lives of believers. This is why, in First Corinthians 11, Paul says to women that their dress

and their demeanor toward their husbands teaches the angels something. He says it ought to be correct “because of the angels,” {1 Cor 11:10}. Angels are watching and learning. What are they learning? Let me share with you another quotation from Dr. Custance:

The key to the existence of such a universe as this lies, I believe, in the fact that God wished to show forth that aspect of his being which the angels have never comprehended, namely his love, without at the same time surrendering that part of his being which they do comprehend, namely his holiness.

So the revelation of the mystery is essentially the revelation of the love of God – in ways that make the angels amazed and startled as they learn the tremendous secrets of God’s love. This is why the Apostle Peter says in his first letter that our salvation is so tremendous that the angels longed to look into these things. What does he mean? Well, that God’s incredible love is being demonstrated by the church in such a way as to startle and amaze the angels, as they see the “many-colored” wisdom of God. The word translated *manifold* here is literally the “many-colored” wisdom of God.

Why did the apostle choose this poetic adjective, which is very rare in the New Testament? It is because, as we know, life consists of many colors. Have you ever had a blue Monday? Yes, we all have blue days. And red hours of anger and passion. And golden moments of glory. And dark, somber valleys through which we must pass. And lush, green pastures into which we are sometimes led. All of these, the apostle suggests, are chosen by the love of the Father. That is what he means. God’s love is manifest in all of these hues of life. His many-colors of wisdom are aspects of his love. So, when you go through a blue time, it is God’s love that you are learning. God’s love chose it for you. When you go through a dark and pressured time, somber and discouraging, the love of God is being manifested there. You may not see it, but God knows how to make it clear. And even the joyful times are manifestations of the many-colored wisdom of God. And, as the angels watch us, they see us

losing our anxiety gradually. We learn to trust God, to turn from our fears, and to renew ourselves with divine strength, to draw upon God's great and mighty promises in the hour of pressure and danger. As they see this, their praise begins to ring out in amazement and wonder at a God – the God of justice, the God of infinite holiness whom they know – who is also able to find a way by which he can lavish his love upon the very ones who deserve his wrath. This makes the angels praise God. They glory as Charles Wesley captured it in that great hymn that I love to sing: "'Tis mystery all, the Immortal died." Imagine that – the Immortal died! "Who can explore this strange design? In vain the first-born serf tries to solve the depths of love divine. 'Tis mercy all, let earth adore, and angel minds inquire no more." You never can completely solve the mystery of God's amazing love, manifested in the many-colored wisdom which leads us into the circumstances of our life. But it is this that edifies the angels, and teaches the demons, of the nature of the greatness of the God we serve.

Paul never lets us forget where it all comes from. Verse 11:

This was according to the eternal purpose [literally, "the ordering of the ages"] which he has realized [accomplished] in Christ Jesus our Lord, {Eph 3:11 RSV}

It all comes through him. In Christ, God has ordered the ages so as to produce the unveiling of this great mystery. This means that all of time and all of history is woven together by the hand of God to bring to pass these great events. Paul and the other apostles proclaimed it. And it is now our fantastic privilege to declare it among men. And Paul goes on to link with it these words:

... in whom [in Jesus Christ our Lord] we have boldness and confidence of access through our faith in him. {Eph 3:12 RSV}

We weak, frail, fumbling, human creatures have access boldly to come in confidence before such a God and to pour out our needs before him, and to find him to be a compassionate, tender, loving father who is concerned to bring to bear all the power of his omnipotence to work out the problems

of our lives. Is there any message greater than this that man could ever hear? What a glorious message! No wonder this apostle got tremendously excited and amazed at the wonder that this message should be committed to him, that he should declare this word and find people discovering these unsearchable riches of Christ, the universal knowledge of the great secret which explains how to unravel all human misery and heartache and problems, and, finally, that it should result in this tremendous demonstration which teaches the heavenly beings – the angels, the demons, the principalities, the powers – truths about God they would never know otherwise. No wonder Paul cried out in amazement at the glory of this mystery.

Now, this was the mystery which began to be revealed at Bethlehem, as there unfolded in that tiny human babe – nestling on the bosom of his mother in the manger of a stable the full glory of what God has done for man. Perhaps you have never found Jesus Christ as your Lord. It is quite possible, of course, to have come to church regularly, and to have heard these truths over and over, but never to have made them personally yours. But their whole effect is lost until you, personally, are born again – born into this new creation by faith in Jesus Christ. So you may desire, in the quiet and solitude of your own heart, simply to invite Jesus Christ in and to ask him to be your Lord and your Savior, your Redeemer and your King, this Christmas season.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, we thank you for the marvelous story of your birth in Bethlehem, which brought you into our lonely, broken race. We thank you for the glory of this mystery which breaks the power of darkness, sets us free from the kingdom of Satan, and brings us into the kingdom of your love, loosens us from chains and habits which bind us and brings us into the liberty of the sons of God. We pray that we may not keep this secret to ourselves, but will gladly tell the story abroad to others, that they too may find the unsearchable riches of Christ. May our hearts, Lord, praise your name with such joy and thanksgiving that your heart is delighted, our Father, as you read the thoughts of our minds and the

expressions of our hearts. May they be pleasing in your sight, so that, as you look at us, it may be as the angels sang so long ago: "Glory to God on the highest and on

earth, peace among men with whom he is well pleased." We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

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How Prayer Works

by Ray C. Stedman

As we come to the end of an old year and the beginning of a new, most of us are engaged in an evaluation of what has happened through the past year. And we struggle with a sense of need for motivation. We are aware of certain failures which have occurred in the past year, even though we began the year with the best of intentions. Somehow things have not gone quite as we expected. We haven't been able to do just what we determined to do. So, as we face the new year, we are asking ourselves, "How can I do better? How can I motivate myself really to do what I know I ought to do?"

Last week I received a note asking a question which puts this rather graphically:

"What can be done about the problem of self-discipline? For the twenty years of my life before becoming a Christian, I found myself unable to achieve this. And after two plus years as a Christian, it still eludes me, though there seems to be some reason for expecting it on the basis of Galatians 5:23."

The verse the writer refers to is about the fruit of the Spirit. It says that not only will there be love and joy and peace, but also gentleness and goodness and self-control – self-discipline. And so this writer is asking, "How can I have this? There is in Christianity the hope of discipline, self-discipline, but how can I lay hold of it?"

This is where many of us struggle – the struggle of *ought* against *is*. "I am this; I ought to be that. How can I do it?" I am sure all of us have felt this way at times.

The world's answer at this time of the year, of course, is New Year's resolutions: "I will determine to do this. I will grit my teeth and say, 'Yes, I am going to do it.' I will set myself to it. I'll prop

myself up with reminders here and there, and tell my friends so they can help me. This way I will get it done." But every December brings ample testimony that this doesn't work, because it is what we tried last year at this time – and it didn't work!

Well, this is the very problem the apostle is facing in the closing verses of Chapter 3 in his letter to the Ephesians. He is concerned about these Ephesians. You get the setting of this passage in Verse 13, where Paul says,

So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, {Eph 3:13 RSV}

The Christians in and about Ephesus were in danger of losing heart.

Did you ever lose heart?

When an athlete is in an endurance contest of some kind, he presses on and on, though his legs begin to turn to rubber and his breath comes heavily and he experiences real physical pain. He keeps going nevertheless. And when he finishes, we say, "What a great heart he's got. He's got the morale, the stamina, to stay with it."

But when you lose heart – you lose stamina, you lose morale. You come to the place where you say, "What's the use? Why keep going? I can't make it." And you give up. That is what Paul sensed was about to happen there in Ephesus. They were about to give in, lose heart. So he says, "I am concerned. Don't lose heart. The situation isn't the way you think it is." And, as we have seen, he teaches them some wonderful truth to show them why they ought not to lose heart.

But then he closes with this great prayer:

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant

you to be strengthened with might through his Spirit in the inner man, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fulness of God. {Eph 3:14-19 RSV}

The apostle has dealt with the problem of motivation once before, in Chapter 1. He closes that chapter with a prayer too. In Verse 15 he says, “For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers,” {Eph 1:15-16 RSV}. Then he goes on to pray that the eyes of their hearts may be enlightened, that the truth may grip their emotions and thus enlighten their minds, so that they will begin to see truth not merely as intellectual dogma but as living reality, a revelation of the way things are, and that they thus will be motivated to begin to move in the direction God wants. The prayer in Chapter 3 picks up right from that very point and goes on from there. For the apostle makes clear that they need not only to have light and knowledge to begin, but they need power to continue. They not only need motivation, but they need resolution to keep going, to stay with it, to stick on to the end.

Isn't that what we need? We are facing a new year. Most of us know that we can make it through the first two weeks pretty well. All our bad habits will drop away, and we can be kind to our neighbors, our mother and father, our children – and even the dog – for two weeks. But then it begins to ebb and wane. By the end of January we are pretty well back into the same old ruts we were in before.

What we need is not only motivation, not only light to begin, but power to continue. That is the difference between this prayer in Chapter 3 and the one in Chapter 1. That was a prayer for understanding – understanding that grips even the emotions. But this is a prayer for power – power which keeps you going and helps you to recover from losing heart.

So if that is your problem, or has been, or will be, then I hope you will give careful attention to this prayer, because the Apostle Paul begins at that point – with someone who is about to lose heart, or

has lost heart, someone who says that they have reached the depths of depression and despair, and that they think they are unable to come back to the Lord. What do you do for them? Maybe you are there yourself. Maybe you are thinking of someone right now who is there, and you don't know where to start. Then pay careful heed as the apostle takes us step by step up a grand staircase of endeavor here, step laid upon step, rising constantly, and leading us on to the fullest possible experience of Christian vitality.

We will look at it in the simple divisions that Paul himself provides – first his prayer itself, and then the great paean of praise which comes at the end. The first step:

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, {Eph 3:14-15 RSV}

In other words, he begins with prayer. This is important to emphasize. We need to understand more about the ministry of prayer. I am convinced that, although there has been much prayer for one another during the last two or three years here at PBC, we still need a great deal more understanding of what prayer really does and how it works.

The apostle evidently clearly understood this, because he is never very far from prayer for those to whom he writes and for whom he is concerned. He understood that this was an essential ingredient to the solution of their problems. And not only for them, but for him, as an apostle. He needed them to pray for him, and he asked for it again and again.

I am very concerned that as we study this passage together, we catch the vast significance of this. The place to begin when somebody's faith is failing, when they are turning cold and lethargic and dead in their spiritual experience, is to pray for them.

Notice particularly the One to whom Paul prays. He says, “I bow my knees before the Father.” It wasn't customary for the Jews to bow their knees in prayer. We think of kneeling as the common posture of prayer, although perhaps not as much these days as a few decades ago. But the Jews usually prayed standing with arms outstretched to God. It was only when something was of deep, intense concern that they bowed the knees

or prostrated themselves before God; this is the position the apostle takes here.

Of course, it really isn't important what your position is. I vaguely remember a humorous poem about a group of Christians who were arguing about this. One insisted that the only way to pray was on your knees. Another insisted that it had to be standing with bowed head. A third asserted that the only way to pray was to be seated in a chair looking up to God. One, who till then had been silent, told of an incident in which he accidentally fell head first into a well. While he was hanging there upside down, he prayed a prayer which he said was the most effective he had ever prayed! So it isn't posture that is important.

Nevertheless, the apostle stresses the earnestness of his prayer: "bow my knees in earnest concern for you who are about to lose heart." He prays to the Father: "before the Father." And then he adds, "from whom every [literally] fatherhood in heaven and on earth is named." It's not family. It is fatherhood. In other words, God is a Father. He is the very epitome of fatherhood, and every fatherhood in heaven and on earth which deserves the name of father draws its characteristics from the fatherhood of God. He is the archetypal father – the Father from whom all fatherhood takes its essence and its character.

Now, this doesn't mean paternity. Sometimes we read in the newspaper of a paternity suit wherein a woman sues a certain man, claiming that he is the father of her child. It may be true that he has participated in the conception of the child, and is in that sense the father. But that is a far cry from the words "Father" and "fatherhood" as Paul uses them here. Sometimes "Father" is used in the sense that God is the father of all human beings, and in that sense perhaps it is correct. But here it is in the sense of fatherhood, which evokes concepts of concern and provision and loving guidance and faithful training, of shared pleasures, of occasional firm handling, of increasing communion. That is fatherhood. And the apostle wants you to remember that when you are despairing about your spiritual life or about someone else's, when you are feeling cold and lethargic, and you are about to lose heart, and you feel like giving up and saying it is time to quit, then that is the time to turn to a Father. God is our Father, and he is the very quintessence of fatherhood. And he approaches this problem of the paralysis of our will out of the re-

sources he has as a father, which Paul describes as "the riches of his glory":

**... that according to the riches of his glory
... {Eph 3:16a RSV}**

God's glory is God's being, God's person. He himself is his own riches of glory. And when God wants to display his glory he shows you himself. He reveals what he is like. This is why the apostle stresses this at this time. For you are not going to some cold, distant being – sitting up on some remote Mount Olympus somewhere, flapping his eyelids in contemptuous indifference to your needs – to ask for help. You are coming to a tender, concerned, loving Father, who is deeply involved with you, who wants you to grow, who is concerned about your welfare, and who will not leave you in some state of arrested development. That is what Paul sets before us as the background of this prayer.

Now he begins to trace step by step **the course of recovery from spiritual depression:**

**... he may grant you to be strengthened with
might through his Spirit in the inner man,
{Eph 3:16b RSV}**

1. That is the first step: "strengthened with might by his Spirit [literally] 'into' the inner man." This is not a reminder that the Spirit dwells in the inner man, although that is true. Rather, the idea here is that the Spirit might infuse his own strength into your inner man. Well, what is your inner man? You and I are of course familiar with this distinction between the outer man and the inner man. We take care of the outer man carefully. We dress it, we clothe it, we feed it, we comb it, we pat it, we primp it, we wash it, we dry it, we smear it with cream. We are always concerned with the outer man – the body and its needs. But we are also aware that there is an inner man.

Many commentators, I find, take this to mean the soul, the inner soul, with its faculties of reason and emotion and will, our thought life, and so on. But I don't think this is what Paul means here, because in Second Corinthians 4 he gives us a clue to what he does mean when he says "the inner man." There he says that "the outer man is perishing, but the inner

man is being renewed day by day,” {cf, 2 Cor 4:16 KJV}. That is, for Christians there is something about us which is getting old, decaying, deteriorating, but there is also something about us which is getting better, getting fresher and more vital, increasing, and becoming richer and deeper and stronger every day we live. And that is what he calls “the inner man.”

Now, you know as well as I, that your soul grows old as well as your body. Your mind can become enfeebled by age, and your emotions can grow unstable and easily affected the older you become. We are all familiar with this. And even the will can become enfeebled, so that you don’t have the same resolution and drive and determination you once had. So it is clear that the soul is part of our life linked with the outer man which is perishing day by day. We are getting older, growing senile.

I had lunch some time ago with a man my age. At the end of the meal I paid the bill. I gave the waiter the money and he took the bill away and brought the change back. To my astonishment, my friend helped himself to the change and put it in his pocket. Absent minded! I realized that I was having lunch with a senile old man! (I won’t tell you about all the times I do things like that.)

But, you see, that is not the inner man. The inner man here is the spirit, the human spirit. And it is here that God begins the work of recovery – not in the soul, in the spirit. Not in the realm of our feelings, in other words, but in what psychologists would call the realm of the subconscious, the deep-seated part of our life, the fundamental element of our nature. You know that when you are really discouraged, really broken-hearted, and have given up, the way your condition is often described is as *dispirited*. That is an accurate term. You have become *dis-spirited*. Your fundamental nature is dissatisfied, discontent. It is not merely a question of temporary boredom. That would be in the realm of the soul. But this is something which touches the spirit, right at the very deepest level of human life, and you find yourself filled with ennui, with despair and indifference, and it persists for hours and days on end.

This is where the recovery must begin. And what the apostle tells us about here is the capability of the Creator himself, our loving

Father, to give us a fresh infusion of strength by his Spirit into our spirit the inner man. We are strengthened with might by his Spirit into the inner man. In First Corinthians 12, speaking of believers, Paul says, “by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body [We have been made members of the body of Christ.], and ... made to drink of one Spirit,” {1 Cor 12:13 RSV}. That is what our human spirits are for – they are to drink of the Spirit of God, so that the Spirit of God is able to refresh us and revitalize us. Just as taking a drink refreshes your body, so drinking of the Spirit refreshes your spirit, at the deepest level of your life.

Now, that is not the realm of feeling. I want this to be clear, because we get so hung up, in this process of spiritual recovery, by always wanting an instantly good feeling. We seek some instant sense of relief. Well, relief will come, but it doesn’t start there. It starts down at the level of the spirit, and may be nothing more than some consciousness of reassurance that things are going to work out eventually.

This beginning step is not your responsibility; it is God’s. Doesn’t that help? You don’t have to start it. He does. All that is necessary is that you ask him for it. You ask, or someone else asks on your behalf – one or the other. Paul prayed that these Ephesians might have this granted to them. And they could have prayed for themselves, if they had known what to pray for, because a prayer is nothing but a cry of helplessness: “God help me.” When we ask on that level, God promises to give.

Remember what Jesus himself taught in that great passage on prayer in Luke 11, at the end of the story of the importunate friend: “What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent?” {Luke 11:11 RSV}. Would any earthly father do that? Would he tantalize, torture his son that way? “Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?” {Luke 11:12 RSV}. What kind of a father would do anything like that? “No, of course not;” Jesus says, “neither will God.” “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more ...” {Luke 11:13a RSV}. Do you feel the force of his argument? “... how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to

those who ask him!" {Luke 11:13b RSV}. He is not talking about how to be indwelt by the Spirit, but about how to recover from losing heart. The way to start, the first step, is to ask God to grant you that your spirit will receive a new infusion of strength, that you can drink again of the river of the Spirit of life which is in you, and that your spirit will be restored so that you can begin to operate as God intended you to. You won't feel this, necessarily. We sharply feel what occurs in the soul, but only sort of deeply sense things taking place in our spirit.

2. This moves us to the second step, which immediately follows. Paul prays that God may grant you to be strengthened with might through his Spirit into the inner man so:

... that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; {Eph 3:17a RSV}

Notice the connection – literally, it is not “and that” but “so that.” You are strengthened by his Spirit so that Christ may, literally, “make his home” in your heart. The strengthening of your spirit results in your sensing the personal presence of the Lord Jesus, as your reborn faith takes hold of his promise once again.

The key to that second step is the words “through faith.” Why have you been languishing, why have you been growing weak and unable to operate? Well, because your faith is failing. You are not as clearly and as sharply believing the reality that God reveals. Your faith is dragging. What the infusion of the Spirit does is to awaken faith, so that you can begin to believe again. And the first thing to believe is the most fundamental fact of Christian life – Jesus Christ has come to live in you. Even yet there may not be much feeling involved. It is just a fact that faith again rests upon Jesus' promise given in the Upper Room in John 14. Do you remember how he put it to Judas, not Iscariot? Judas said to him, “Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?” {John 14:22 RSV}. And Jesus answered him, “If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our

home with him,” {John 14:23 RSV}. That is what Paul is referring to. Faith is awakened now. You remind yourself that Jesus Christ lives in you. You are a believer. He has taken up his residence in you. He will not leave you. He is at home in your heart, and you belong to him.

3. That immediately brings the third step. Do you see how Paul is leading us, step by step, back to recovery?

... that you, being rooted and grounded in love, {Eph 3:17b RSV}

Ah, love! Now feeling is beginning to return. Once again you are beginning to sense something, but it is the third step, not the first, when sensation comes back. Reassured by Jesus' promise to be with you, you now know that you are loved, and that he cares for you, and that he will not change that relationship. Therefore, your self-identity returns.

In other words, as Paul puts it, you are “rooted and grounded in love.” There he is mixing metaphors. Plants are rooted; buildings are grounded. But Paul ties them together as beautiful figures of security. A plant that is rooted is solid.

Some time ago we had in our yard a tree which you could knock over by pushing. An agronomist came by and told us it was necessary to tie it down so that it couldn't move until the roots took hold. Now you can push it and it will not move. It is rooted and solid and can withstand the storm and stress.

And a building needs to be firmly fixed upon a foundation; otherwise it will shake in the wind and storm.

Paul is simply saying here that we need foundations for our experiences. We can't handle life unless we have a solid foundation, unless we are rooted and grounded – in what? In love – in the assurance that God loves us, and has accepted us, that we are dear to him, precious to him. When we know this, then we know who we are. Then we have a sense of well-being. Love always gives us that.

That is why a lonely, solitary life is so difficult – because there is no sense of well-being. That is why it is the greatest cause of suicide in

this world. What causes people to jump off bridges and blow out their brains? They don't feel loved. No one appreciates them. No one reaches out to them. But the Christian can find his ground of solidarity and security and love in Jesus Christ.

4. And when that stage is reached, then you are ready for the next – the fourth step:

... that you ... may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, {Eph 3:18 RSV}

Now we are climbing back to power and vitality. This sense of identity gives us power to relate to others “power to comprehend [or “realize” is literally the word] with all saints.” This means that now we can begin to relate to somebody else, to reach out to someone else. And when we do, we will begin to lay hold of the breadth and length and height and depth.

I want to stress that we are not to live in isolation – that is our problem – but to relate to one another, to “realize with all saints,” and not to try to work it out all alone. Many Christians attempt to live in solitary confinement. They resist relating, resist sharing. But you see, that is falling into the trap in which the world lives. The world talks a lot about privacy, longs for privacy, struggles to have areas of life that no one sees. It insists upon having private reserves, areas no one enters. But the price of that is loneliness. You can't have privacy without having loneliness. And if loneliness is your trouble, it is because you are insisting upon being private.

The church cuts right across this.

Christian teaching and doctrine undermine this whole philosophy, because it tells us we are not to be private. We are to relate, we are to share. We are to be open. We are to “widen our hearts” as Paul puts it to the Corinthians. “Widen your hearts,” {2 Cor 6:13 RSV} he says. “Reach out to each other. Bear each other's burdens,” {cf, Gal 6:2}. Confess your faults one to another,” {Jas 5:16}. The Christian is to have no private areas in his life at all. If he insists upon it, he is defying what God has called him to – the sharing of the body of

Christ in openness and freedom for all to see exactly what you are. As you begin to relate to and to share with one another, then, the apostle says, you begin to realize, to lay hold of, the height and depth and length and breadth.

What does he mean? There are many who have made beautiful suggestions about the meaning of these four dimensions. Some see in them the cross, with its height and depth and length and breadth. Some see it as a description of the love of God. But I think they are a reference to some of the things Paul has talked about in this letter already:

- The “length” is what he calls in Chapter 1 “the hope to which you are called” {Eph 1:18 RSV} – that hope which began before the foundation of the world, in eternity past, and reaches on through all of recorded time and history into the ages ahead, into the unsearchable, limitless reaches of eternity yet to come. That is the whole length and scope of God's program. We are caught up in a vast cosmic endeavor to bring all things to one in Christ. We are part of that – the hope to which we are called.
- And the “breadth,” of course, is what he refers to as “the riches of his inheritance among the Gentiles” {cf, Eph 1:18} – the fact that Jews and Gentiles and all men alike are gathered up in the church, without difference or division – black, white, rich, poor, slave, freeman, male, female – it doesn't make any difference. All are one. All humanity is caught up in the riches of Jesus Christ, in the cross and in the church.
- The “height” is the place to which we are raised with Christ – risen to sit together with him in heavenly places, far above all principalities, all powers, all authorities, in this age and in the age to come. It is the place of authority as a Christian, the place of power to be freed from everything that would drag you down, the place of being given adequate equipment to live above all that would disturb and twist and injure and demolish and destroy in your life.

- And finally, the “depth,” of course, is what he has described in Chapter 2 as death, the living death out of which God has called us – when we were victims instead of victors, when we were following the course of this age, living unwittingly directed by the prince of the power of the air, following the passions of the flesh, doing what we thought was right and ending up being wrong in everything we attempted, “children of wrath,” as Paul described us – “by nature children of wrath like the rest of mankind,” {Eph 2:3 RSV}. Out of that living death – the depths of human depravity – God called us into the heights with Christ.

And, you see, all of this comes to us as we learn to relate to others. This is why the church has been so barren and poverty stricken, so narrow, so insular, so isolated. We have loved to come to services and just sit and listen, but not relate to anyone else. This is why we have been trying to have “body life” services and trying to encourage you to meet your friends and neighbors when you come to church, get acquainted with the ones sitting next to you. Because it is in reaching out to “realize with all saints” that there comes the ability to lay hold of all these great provisions in Jesus Christ.

5. The next step:

... and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, {Eph 3:19a RSV}

That is the fifth step. Think of it – to know the unknowable! How do you do that? Well, here is where experience reaches its full peak. You begin to know the love of Christ. Here is where feeling comes in full throttle. You can really begin to glow with this understanding of the love of Christ. You can’t understand it but you can feel it. We all know how you can feel something you can’t comprehend. A baby feels his mother’s love. He senses how deeply his mother loves him, and there are times when he won’t go to anyone else but his own mother be-

cause he knows his mother loves him. But what does a baby understand about a mother’s love? He can’t comprehend it. But he feels it, knows it. So the apostle tells us that as we begin to lay hold of these great truths we begin to see the love of Christ in everything that happens to us – in our circumstances, in the world of nature around, in relationships, in life itself. We are simply overwhelmed with the sense of love of Jesus Christ. As we sometimes sing, “Heaven above is softer blue, earth around is sweeter green; something lives in every hue, Christless eyes have never seen.”

6. And then we come to the last step:

... that you may be filled with all the fulness of God. {Eph 3:19b RSV}

Now you have reached the top. And when you have, you have realized the purpose of your own creation. This is what God made humanity for. He made us to be vessels wholly filled and flooded with God himself.

Now, this is not a condition you attain only once or twice in your Christian life. It is a condition to which we are to return again and again. This is what Paul refers to as being filled with the Spirit. It is the condition in which God is in possession and control of our lives, enriching us, blessing us, and strengthening us. Our faith is strong and vital, and we are reaching out, ministering. And, as Paul puts it earlier, we are God’s workmanship, and we will discover the good works to which we have been foreordained.

You say, “Can all this be, in the new year?” Well, we will simply close with the final verses of this chapter:

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all, generations, for ever and ever. Amen. {Eph 3:20-21 RSV}

Who is going to do this? You? No, no; God in you. That is the secret, isn’t it?

God in you is able to do more abundantly all you can ask or think. What are you dreaming

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about for the new year? Well, if you insist upon manipulating it and trying to bring it to pass, the best that you can hope for is what you can ask or think. But if you put your case in the hands of this mighty God, and follow these steps, obeying him about yourself, and praying for others in this same way, you will discover that, though he might take you in ways you don't understand and at first seem

to be almost tragic in their nature, nevertheless, out of them he will bring you to the place where you stand in amazement and awe and wonder at what he has brought into your experience and your life – beyond all that you can ask or think. That is the nature of the God with whom we have to do, and that is the power at work in us right now.

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