

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.

Now let's look at them together in more detail. Paul says, "You have heard the word of truth." 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 habits 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!

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." 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 Savior, 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 anyone 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.

The third thing that the apostle brings before us here is the strange phrase, "sealed with the promised Holy Spirit." 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 furthermore, 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 overspill 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 4000 years ago, 2000 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 problems, 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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